

Testimony of Stephen Drachler
A United Methodist Witness in Pennsylvania
May 7, 2009

Good afternoon, Chairman Santoni and members of the committee.

My name is Stephen Drachler. I am executive director of A United Methodist Witness in Pennsylvania.

United Methodist Witness is the social justice advocacy arm of The United Methodist Church in Pennsylvania. We are part of a coalition – Stop Video Poker PA – that has organized to oppose this legislation. Our coalition is comprised of faith and civic groups.

Our web site – www.stopvideopokerpa.org -- offers citizens an opportunity to voice their concerns to Gov. Rendell and their legislators.

Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you for making time for me to speak today, to offer perspective from those who do not believe expanding gambling is good social or fiscal policy.

I believe we are the first organization opposed to this legislation to address the committee during your hearings.

It is vital for decision-makers to hear from all perspectives on important issues like this.

I encourage you to make time to hear from more groups who question the wisdom of this legislation.

United Methodist Witness represents nearly two thousand four hundred United Methodist congregations. There is a United Methodist Church in nearly every community in Pennsylvania. And there are nearly a half-million United Methodists in Pennsylvania.

The United Methodist Church's position on video poker in restaurants and bars is very clear.

Church law states that gambling is a menace to society, deadly to the best interests of moral, social, economic and spiritual life, and it destructs good government.

Gambling encourages the belief that work is unimportant, that money can solve all our problems, and that greed is the norm for achievement. It serves as a "regressive tax" on those with lower incomes.

In summary, gambling is bad economics; gambling is bad public policy; and gambling does not improve the quality of life.

Gambling is not a win-win exchange, but requires many losers to benefit the few winners.

We know this position is not popular in some circles.

We know we are up against many powerful and influential interests who want to place video lottery – video poker – machines in thousands of restaurants and taverns across the state.

In fact, we are somewhat like David in his battle with Goliath. Goliath towers over us. The odds – pun intended – are against us.

Like David, we're up for the battle.

Like David, we are seeking strength and guidance from God as we prepare for this confrontation.

Theologically speaking, we believe it vital to take a stand against injustice.

We believe God calls us – implores us – to speak the truth, a truth fashioned in our love and concern for our neighbors – our love and concern for those who will be hurt by any expansion of gambling in our state. It is in our DNA as United Methodists.

We were very disappointed earlier this week to see that Governor Rendell has resorted to using a videoconference with high school students to drum up support for this proposal.

Frankly, we believe he should have known better. What lesson is he teaching here? What sort of example is he offering to our young people?

If he believes he is teaching civic activism, we believe he has picked the wrong issue.

The governor is doing what House Bill 1317 does – offering a false choice to the high school students and their parents.

We strongly disagree this is all about scholarships so more of Pennsylvania's young people can attend college. Students and their parents are being used as pawns in this false choice.

This false choice is not new. It is a pattern that has evolved over the past few decades in Pennsylvania and across our nation.

Both major political parties have fallen prey to the lure of the quick buck, and the quick tax on those quick bucks.

Government sees a need for money. Instead of working to find socially and morally acceptable solutions, government takes the easy way out by adding more gambling.

First horse racing. Then the daily lottery, and then the lunchtime lottery. Then larger and larger numbers for larger and larger jackpots. Then Powerball and its mega-millions.

And then just a few years later, the big one – slots casinos. And now, before all the slots casinos are even open for business, and as gaming regulators are up to their necks in problems, we have this proposal, to turn restaurants and bars into mini-casinos. And casino table games are next on the legislative horizon.

It is a never-ending cycle of more and more money spent on gambling, money which does not repair homes, feed children, or pay for the medical bills of families.

What are we becoming? What message are we sending our children and grandchildren? What legacy are we leaving them?

We are telling them the answers to our problems are in the numbers – from the slots terminal, from the video poker terminal – which is really no different from the slots terminal. Play a quarter to win your dream, solve your problems.

That, members of the committee, is the false choice. And it is the side of this issue proponents simply do not want to hear.

We are sure there are alternative solutions – solutions that would take hard work and political courage to implement.

One small step would be to enforce the law against video poker machines – a real problem here in Western Pennsylvania – and dedicate the fine money to college assistance.

If there are 17,000 machines out there as the governor has estimated, and each machine turned into a \$1,000 fine, that's \$17 million. Nothing to sneeze at. A beginning.

We find that whenever the issue of false choices is raised, the subject gets changed awfully fast.

We believe it is because the answer is clear: Gambling is not the answer to Pennsylvania's fiscal problems.

Let's consider the human toll from video poker for a few moments.

Experts in the field of video poker – and there is no doubt that we are talking about video poker here – say this is one of the most dangerous and addictive forms of gambling.

Dr. Robert Hunter, a psychologist who operates the Problem Gambling Center in Las Vegas, says video poker is the crack cocaine of gambling.

Why? The video games move so quickly, and the lure of winning is so strong, that players are easily be trapped by the hypnotic effect of the machines.

Dr. Hunter is one of the leading experts on gambling addiction. He knows of what he speaks.

Gamblers Anonymous says video poker drives gambling addicts to rock bottom 10 times faster than addiction to other forms of gambling, such as horse racing.

Dr. Earl Grinols, distinguished professor of economics at Baylor University, has been studying the impact of gambling for many years.

Dr. Grinols says the social costs of gambling addicts are enormous. One study put that cost at \$10,000 on average per year in costs for law enforcement, unemployment, health problems, and lost productivity at work.

Just two weeks ago, Dr. Grinols asked an audience in Fort Wayne, Indiana, a city considering a casino: "How many people pawn their possessions for recreation?"

Nevada, he says, shows what can happen to a society where gambling is king. Nevada leads the nation in its suicide rate, divorce, women killed by men, and gambling addiction.

I would encourage you to invite Dr. Hunter and Dr. Grinols to testify at one of your hearings.

I urge you to hear from some of the victims of gambling addiction right here in Pennsylvania. Listen to their stories. Listen to their husbands, and wives, and children.

It's a side of the issue that deserves a full hearing, not lip service.

Please don't say you've heard from an opponent – me – and move on.

Take some time to consider the potential affect of video poker and video games in restaurants on families and children.

How will these devices change the dynamic, change the atmosphere in restaurants that cater to families?

Is this the type of environment we want to expose our children to?

We believe it sends the wrong message, that gambling is a socially accepted norm, a socially accepted and reasonable way to find financial happiness.

It is unfortunate that Gov. Rendell – by encouraging young people, high school students who are not old enough to vote, to lobby for this bill – doesn't mind the changes it will bring.

This legislation is one more sign that Pennsylvania's government – our elected leaders – are now addicted to gambling and its false promises and its false choices.

Pennsylvania's government – our elected leaders – is addicted to gambling and its false promises and false choices. The siren's song of easy money has lured them into the trap.

Members of the committee, we believe House Bill 1317 is where you can, and must, step away from the trap. It is not too late.

We urge you to say no to more gambling in Pennsylvania.

Thank you for privilege of appearing here today.

I look forward to responding to your questions.

