



PUBLIC STATEMENT ON THE ILLINOIS FINANCIAL CRISIS

COUNCIL OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS OF METROPOLITAN CHICAGO

January 5, 2011

With the 2010 elections now behind us and a New Year beginning, it is our shared prayer, as members of the Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago, that our elected legislative and executive officials in Illinois will address the State's budgetary crisis promptly, equitably, and structurally. We believe this can be accomplished if the spirit and manner of bi-partisanship prevails.

For over twenty-five years the Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago has cooperatively and collegially spoken out publicly on wide range of issues related to social justice. Consisting of leaders from eight world religions -- Baha'i, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism -- representing over five million believers, the Council sees the current budget crisis in the State as foundational to virtually every particular concern about injustice in Illinois. There is, therefore, a profound sense of urgency in our appeal for legislative and executive action.

We think "promptness" is a necessary expectation. The debate about how to "fix" our fiscal crisis is longstanding and most of the issues and alternatives are already familiar. It is also the case that a delay will simply put the matter back into the politics of the next election cycle. The problems related to public pensions have a new urgency and most likely will need to be addressed as part of a comprehensive budgetary solution, but this must not be the cause for dawdling when so much is at stake for every resident of the State. The budgetary challenge we face in the State must be resolved as the first order of the government's agenda.

The criterion of "equitability" or fundamental fairness should, of course, be an integral part of our democracy. Our current tax system clearly does not meet that norm, leading to great inequalities in such areas as the funding of public support for health and human services, public safety, and taxation itself -- making it all the more imperative that this standard be centrally operative in any proposal under consideration.

And we believe that any viable solution to our budgetary crisis must be “structural” in the sense of having the capacity to fund the State’s business in ways that are sufficient and dependable over time and yet responsive to changes in economic activity and growth. Therefore, we urge our elected officials to avoid the temptation of again relying on annual one-time or short-term “fixes” to address shortfalls in revenues as part of a structural deficit. The practice of “borrowing” from public pensions and the failure to repay these funds has created its own fiduciary mismanagement.

We acknowledge that there are genuine differences among public officials and in the wider public about the appropriate role and obligations of government. Indeed, these differences are evident among members of our own Council. But we believe that, at the very least, those governmental roles must include policies that relate to what is essential and good for all, irrespective of the diversity of our citizenry. They must help provide care and support for those who are vulnerable and who, without governmental assistance, cannot survive, achieve normal human development, or participate productively in our democratic society. These understandings of the role of government are certainly not held only by religious traditions but are widely shared civically as well.

The central roles for government, serving the common good and caring for those with special needs, are not just compromised by our current budgetary crisis, but are deeply in peril, making it imperative that members of the General Assembly and the Governor take decisive, responsible, and constructive action on the financial crisis as a top priority. We believe, in short, that the viability of state government itself is in question.

We have no technical expertise to offer about how specifically to achieve financial and budgetary reform on either the revenue or expenditure sides of the ledger. We, nevertheless, urge that you abide by the criteria enumerated at the outset of this communication and insist that there are limits, based on the proper role of government, to what can be reduced or eliminated in funding governmental services.

Based on our own experience and those of our colleagues who work in our human care agencies on behalf of the State and depend on state funding (especially in the areas of health care and human services), we believe the limits of their resources have already been exceeded and must now be restored in any reform proposal. The State cannot shut its eyes to vast human suffering among our fellow citizens.

If faith-based and other not-for-profit organizations are to serve as agents of the State in the delivery of these governmentally funded services, they cannot be threatened with extinction because of the State’s financial irresponsibility. That, however, is exactly what we are experiencing among our own service providers, as they have exhausted their reserves and are struggling to survive given the delinquency in payments owed by the State.

The members of our Council represent, in leadership positions, the great diversity of religious communities in metropolitan Chicago. In conversations with our counterparts in

other parts of the State, however, we find that our concerns are shared, virtually without exception. We demand no special claim on the attention of political officials on behalf of our religious communities. We address them and the general public, rather, as fellow citizens with deeply held values that we assume are widely shared, including a commitment to good and responsible government and to the positive role government can play in the lives of individuals and families, neighborhoods and communities, and the life we hold in common as residents of Illinois. The Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago urges you to use this time of crisis as an exceptional opportunity to right the wrongs of our recent past, to act on behalf of the common good and those who are needy and suffering among us, and to establish a foundation for just public policies through responsible revenue generation and careful budgeting in our shared future.

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About the Council of Religious Leaders

The Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago (CRLMC) was founded 25 years ago, at a time when racial tensions and social injustices were on the rise, and a group of religious leaders in Chicago recognized the growing need to understand cultural and religious differences and learn how to work together. His Eminence the late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, Archbishop of Chicago, called together the leaders of the Episcopal, Greek Orthodox and Protestant Churches, along with the Chicago Board of Rabbis to form the Council. Today the Council gathers an even greater diversity of religious leaders and institutions, enriched by the participation of such as Mormon, Muslim and Quaker faith communities, the Community Renewal Society and the Chicago Center for Cultural Connections (formerly the National Conference of Christians and Jews, NCCJ, and most recently leaders of the Baha'i, Hindu, Jain, Sikh and Zoroastrian traditions. To the best of our knowledge, CRLMC is unique as a continuing inter-religious organization in the nation and likely in the world. By uniting the churches, synagogues, temples, mosques, and other religious assemblies, CRLMC seeks to present a unified vision and voice on issues affecting the common good of the people of Chicago.

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