Over 200 people from across Wisconsin assembled in Madison at the Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center on April 10 for the 8th Biennial “Catholics at the Capitol” legislative day, organized by the Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC).

The day-long event featured a keynote address by Bishop Peter F. Christensen of Superior, “Reclaiming the Common Good in the Year of Faith.”

Bishop Christensen asked, “Why are we here? Why spend time in this arena?”

He answered these questions with three points:

• We need to be educated on the topics of the day, the work of government, and our role in it.

• We need to remind ourselves of our responsibility as citizens to participate.

• We should celebrate the gift of our faith in a marketplace setting and remind others that everything we have is from God.

While some people might think we should keep religion out of politics, Bishop Christensen asserted, “As citizens we have every right to be here and make our voices heard. As Christians we enter fully in the public arena, because we have a right and an obligation which stems from our baptism.”

The keynote address was followed by issue-oriented “breakout” sessions and concluded with participants having the opportunity to visit the offices of their state legislators.

Governor Walker joined the gathering during the lunch break and offered words of welcome and encouragement for Catholic participation in public policy debates.

The day concluded with a panel discussion on “Voicing Catholic Values in a Diverse Society,” featuring Bishop Christensen, Auxiliary Bishop Donald Hying of Superior.
Director’s Corner
John Huebscher, Executive Director

One of my college professors once observed that research is generally a matter of strategy not morals. His point was that a variety of approaches may be useful and that no single technique need be used all the time.

In the early months of this two-year legislative session, the WCC has employed three different means of calling attention to, and advocating for, our policy positions.

In February, the five diocesan bishops signed a joint letter to all 132 legislators, urging that the state budget include some mechanism to make educational choice available to more parents in Wisconsin. In this case, the letter spoke directly from the Church’s long experience operating schools that educate children, often from families of limited financial means.

In April, Archbishop Listecki spoke at a press conference along with two state senators, Bishop Jeffrey Barrow of the Greater Milwaukee Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and other advocates, to articulate the WCC’s opposition to exempting “rent-to-own” companies from the Wisconsin Consumer Act.

Most recently in May, I co-signed an “opinion editorial” with the directors of the Wisconsin Council of Churches, the Wisconsin Jewish Conference, and the Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin, urging the Legislature to expand its Medicaid program by utilizing federal funds available for this purpose. This was a case of interfaith agreement in support of access to health insurance by low-income persons.

None of these approaches is automatically better than the others. Each one can be appropriate to the moment and the message. And that is typical of advocacy in a pluralistic society.

WCC, Other Religious Groups Urge Expansion of Medicaid

The directors of the Wisconsin Council of Churches, the Wisconsin Jewish Conference, the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, and the Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin, have urged the Wisconsin Legislature’s Joint Committee on Finance to accept federal funding for Medicaid expansion to “ensure that the most vulnerable individuals of our state receive access to quality healthcare.” The four made the request in a May 7 “op-ed” letter to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

“Our respective faith traditions, a right is defined as a moral claim on the community to a good essential for human dignity,” they wrote. “Access to affordable health care is such a right and ensuring access is a common policy goal of long standing for our religious communities.”

The letter noted that some expansion opponents are concerned that future Congresses may reduce some of the federal support that makes expansion possible. However, the letter points out that many Wisconsin institutions owe their existence to religious organizations that faced similar uncertainty.

“Religious communities founded many of Wisconsin’s colleges, hospitals, and charitable programs. They did so fully aware that the future was uncertain and that failure was possible. Yet they began these ministries anyway to meet real human needs.”

The letter disputed the notion that Medicaid expansion fosters dependency among Medicaid participants. “Their lack of health care coverage is not due to a lack of character, but a lack of means. Restoring their health enhances their potential to help themselves. Investing in their health care can enrich our state, even as it enriches their own lives.”

The letter concluded by saying that accepting federal dollars for Medicaid expansion will permit the Legislature to reallocate funds to other critical needs, such as elementary and secondary education, other health programs, tax relief for those in need of it, and community corrections programs.

A copy of the letter may be found on the WCC website.
Bishops Issue Revised Edition of *Now and at the Hour of Our Death*

On May 29, Wisconsin’s bishops issued a revised edition of their pastoral letter on end of life decision-making and advance care planning, *Now and at the Hour of Our Death*. The third edition incorporates a number of changes from earlier editions, including an updated reference to the “Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services” (ERDs), the fifth edition of which was distributed by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2009. The fifth edition of the ERDs includes a clarification on providing patients with nutrition and hydration and the Wisconsin bishops’ letter now reflects this change.

*Now and at the Hour of Our Death* also offers additional guidance on the use of advance directives, with specific reference to the increasing use of Physician Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment (POLST) in Wisconsin. The bishops caution against the use of POLST, citing their July 2012 pastoral letter, “Upholding the Dignity of Human Life.” The bishops have consistently encouraged Catholics to engage in advance care planning and recommended the preparation of a power of attorney for health care.

Throughout the letter, the bishops stress the importance of contemplating questions regarding care in light of Church teaching before a crisis occurs. The letter encourages family members to discuss the reality of illness and death, affirming that “These conversations are vitally important for you and those you love.”

An electronic copy of the letter is available on the WCC website. Individuals may also contact the WCC office to obtain a limited number of print copies.

Archbishop Listecki, Community Leaders Oppose Rent-To-Own Changes

Archbishop Jerome E. Listecki joined legislators and other community leaders on April 26 to express opposition to a provision in the state budget that would exempt rent-to-own (RTO) businesses from the Wisconsin Consumer Act (WCA).

Speaking at the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, Archbishop Listecki joined the Chamber’s President and CEO, Maria Monreal-Cameron, Lutheran Bishop Jeffrey Barrow of the Greater Milwaukee Synod of the ELCA, Senator Glenn Grothman (R-West Bend), Senator Lena Taylor (D-Milwaukee), Director of the consumer advocacy group WISPERG Bruce Speight, and others.

The RTO industry provides consumers household goods, such as appliances, furniture, and audio-visual equipment, through self-renewing installment payments with interest rate charges as high as 200-300 percent. Customers can cancel payments at any time by returning the merchandise to the store. However, 70 percent of RTO consumers end up purchasing items outright, usually at costs that are significantly higher than the market retail price.

Archbishop Listecki explained that Catholic Charities staff tries to educate clients to compare prices and interest rates. He added that this task is made more difficult if the government allows businesses to conceal the true cost of an item by not disclosing the annual percentage rate. The Archbishop then quoted Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, “the market is not, and must not become, the place where the strong subdue the weak.”

He went on to say that “Government has a responsibility to ensure that the market operates in a free, transparent, and honest manner. This is why the Wisconsin Consumer Act is so valuable. It ensures that consumers are not misled or exploited.”

The WCC, at its *Catholics at the Capitol* event and in other writings, had asked Catholics to contact their legislators immediately and urge opposition to the RTO provision. Recently, the Wisconsin Legislature’s Joint Committee on Finance voted to remove the RTO exemption from the state’s budget bill. The Committee’s eight senators were joined by two Representatives in a bipartisan 10-6 vote to remove the provision. Our thanks to them and to everyone who contacted their legislators to urge this action.

Additional information regarding this issue can be found at www.wisconsincatholic.org.
For up-to date information, join the WCC’s free e-advocacy network and get the bi-weekly Capitol Update.

Visit www.wisconsincatholic.org to sign up!

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WCC Staff
John Huebscher, Executive Director
Cathy Coyle-Kaufmann, Admin. Assistant
Barbara Sella, Associate Director for Respect Life/Social Concerns
Kim Wadas, Associate Director for Education/Health Care

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Milwaukee, Director of Evangelization for the Diocese of Green Bay Julianne Stanz, and Wisconsin Catholic Conference Associate Director Barbara Sella.

Responding to critics who say religious groups should not address public policy issues, Bishop Christensen replied, “By the very fact that [people of faith] are citizens, we should have the opportunity to voice what is important in the government.”

Bishop Hying suggested that Catholics must “be much more articulate in what we’re for, rather than in what we’re against. And when we are against something, we make it clear that we’re only against something because it’s a diminishment of a greater yes.”

Stanz explained that the common good “commits us to a life we live publically as we espouse certain values.” She advised young people who question the church to “Learn as much as you can. You cannot love what you do not know.”

Sella added that Catholic positions on issues “are accessible to people of all faiths or no faith.” Though people may disagree with a particular position of the Church, “they can’t say it’s unreasonable.”

Co-sponsors included archdiocesan and diocesan offices of social concerns and respect life, Catholic Charities, the Catholic Health Association of Wisconsin, the Archdiocesan and Diocesan Councils of Catholic Women, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious -Region IX, and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul-Milwaukee Archdiocesan Council.