

YOUTH SPORTS AND PUBLIC ACTIVITIES ON SUNDAY MORNINGS

A STATEMENT OF CONCERN ISSUED BY THE

BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF THE MASSACHUSETTS COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

The following statement on hindrances to and disruptions of Sunday worship services and the dilemmas these situations cause for youth, families and churches was approved by the Board of Directors of the Massachusetts Council of Churches on December 9, 1997. We urge congregations to distribute this statement, accompanied by relevant local information, to community officials, organizational leaders, and newspapers as a helpful deterrent to scheduling insensitivities.

Throughout Massachusetts, many public activities, particularly sports events, are scheduled in conflict with traditional times for Christian worship. Thus, some of our members, particularly youth, are confronted with a difficult choice. They will participate either in worship or in recreational activities.

This is a painful dilemma for children and parents. These choices disrupt the whole family, because parents transport children to these events and want to support their children by attending the games.

Moreover, in some communities public activities such as marathons, "walks," bicycle races, or parades have hindered people from attending worship. These events often are for laudable charitable causes, which heightens the dilemma for community-minded church-goers. Yet sometimes such events even have disrupted worship services, blocking off access streets, posing parking problems by using public areas near churches as gathering points (especially problematic for frail elders), causing churchgoers to run a stressful gauntlet to reach the church door, and creating noisy distractions during worship. In one case, a parade disbanded on a church lawn, with cheers and loudspeakers blaring, while members inside the church were trying to participate in a service of holy communion.

A pattern of public insensitivity to the religious traditions of our churches has emerged, while at the same time many community leaders are talking about the importance of supporting "family values" by providing moral education of youth through family and religious life.

Sunday traditionally was observed as a day of rest. In Christian theology, it has a deeper meaning. It is the Day of the Lord, a Day of Reverence. It comes not only at the end of a week of labor, but it also is the beginning of a new week--the Day of Resurrection when we gather and worship, offering back to God thanksgiving for that which we have received.

To be told to re-schedule our worship, as has occurred sometimes, is insulting. It shows a lack of appreciation for the needs of various groups in our pluralistic culture, as well as a lack of concern about injured sensibilities when religious piety is abused.

We, therefore, appeal to all public officials and private planners of public events to avoid imposing impediments to religious worship, whatever the religious tradition. We understand the difficulties of public scheduling in a pluralistic society. We are convinced, however, that these problems are surmountable with sensitivity. We know of communities where a satisfactory solution has been found. If the various religious traditions in a community are treated with respect and fairness, the benefits of good will, mutual trust, and cooperation will far outweigh any scheduling liabilities.

SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

Because of the serious nature of this problem, we propose the following to churches and communities. In all instances, we urge clergy and congregations to work together ecumenically to offer a common voice:

- 1) Enlist parents and other adults to make a commitment to re-claim Sunday as a Sabbath time set apart.
- 2) Talk with members of the School Committee and other officials responsible for scheduling, and urge them not to plan athletic practices and events for Sunday morning.
- 3) Meet with local league officials and coaches to explore other scheduling options.
- 4) Encourage civic leaders--mayor, town manager, city council, Board of Selectmen--to take a fresh look at these developments and their impact on families, society, and community life.
- 5) Be prepared to offer alternative suggestions.
- 6) Contact the Massachusetts Council of Churches for information about how other clergy associations, councils of churches, and similar bodies have approached the problem in their community.

