

# Leaders say state bill attacks religious liberty

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

Officials with the New York State Catholic Conference charge that a bill introduced in the New York state Senate Feb. 2 is an attempt to shut down a variety of Catholic agencies throughout the state. The bill would eliminate the right of religious employers — including Catholic hospitals, schools and charities — to decline to provide employees with health insurance that covers artificial contraception, including such abortifacients as intrauterine devices.

Passage of the bill would put the church in the untenable position of operating

many of its institutions in violation of church teaching against artificial contraception and abortion, according to Richard E. Barnes, executive director of the conference, which represents New York's eight Catholic bishops, including Bishop Matthew H. Clark, in Albany.

"We understand that the goal of the opponents of conscience protection is to drive the Catholic Church out of the business of health and human services in this state by placing burdens upon us that are impossible to overcome," Barnes said in a Feb. 4 statement. "We pray that they are not successful, for this would be a tragedy for the millions of New Yorkers who rely on our services ..."

The conference is urging Catholics to contact their senators to oppose the bill — S-6265 — which is sponsored by Senate Majority Leader Joseph L. Bruno and supported by pro-choice groups. However, as the *Catholic Courier* was going to press Feb. 5, conference officials expected the bill to pass the Senate that day.

Barnes characterized the legislation as a direct attack on religious freedom.

"What the Senate bill would do is make government the arbiter of what constitutes religion," he said. "This is an unprecedented encroachment by the government into the realm of religion."

Barnes' statement refers to the language of S-6265, which says an organiza-

tion can be considered a religious employer only if the "inculcation of religious values is the purpose of the entity," the "entity primarily employs persons who share the religious tenets of the entity," and the "entity primarily serves persons who share the religious tenets of the entity."

Dennis Poust, assistant executive director of the Catholic conference, noted that the bill seems to indicate "parishes and little else" would be considered Catholic. The bill transfers the right to define what is religious from religious leaders to the state. In contrast, federal law respects the right of the nation's bishops to determine what is and is not Catholic, he said.



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## Focusing on your future

At Christmastime, many single people became engaged. Shortly thereafter, they headed for the bridal and florist shops, and visited reception halls.

So little time, so much to do!

Sister of St. Joseph Karen Dietz would like them to add another item to the top of their to-do lists: FOCCUS.

"I think that couples today put off the churchy stuff, and it's really a shame," said Sister Dietz, diocesan coordinator of sacramental catechesis. "Pre-Cana and FOCCUS are for all their life together. The showers, the dress, the flowers, are for a single event. From our perspective the FOCCUS and pre-Cana should come before all that, or at least simultaneously to all that, because it is so important to the life of the couple."

FOCCUS is an acronym for a program entitled Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding & Study. It is a self-diagnostic inventory of questions that explore lifestyle expectations, problem solving, communication, personal issues, religion and values, parenting and other matters.

A key designer of the tool, School Sister of Notre Dame Barbara Markey, admits that FOCCUS "looks like a test, smells like a test." But, she added, "It is an instrument to open up discussion and move with it."

For some 20 years Mike Stapleton and his wife, Janet, have helped prepare engaged couples for marriage before they stepped aside last month at Church of the Resurrection in Fairport. When a couple met with the parish priest to select a wedding date, he would give them the Stapletons' number to call as well as a number for Engaged Encounter. Then the couple visited the Stapletons' home. The two couples spent some time getting to know each other, and then

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STORY BY KATHLEEN SCHWAR



## FOCCUS

Facilitating Open  
Couple Communication,  
Understanding & Study

