

Religious Voices for Justice Contribute to Important Victories: A Report on the 2009 Session of the Oregon Legislature

July 2, 2009

Throughout the 2009 legislative session, religious voices -- YOUR voices -- were heard in Salem.

At two Interfaith advocacy events, at Hunger Lobby Day, at Health Care Lobby Day, in legislative hearings, and in individual meetings with legislators -- many of you participated in calling for more to be done to reduce hunger, to expand health coverage and affordable housing, to protect the environment, and to expand civil rights. Many of you who did not come down to Salem in person made calls, or sent emails to express your support for creating a more just and sustainable society.

The 2009 Legislative Session is finished now, and this is a full report on how our work, and your work, paid off, and on the work that remains for the future.

As you know, this was a challenging session due to a \$4 billion budget shortfall. Early on Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon (EMO) called for new sources of revenue to help address this crisis, knowing that without some progressive tax increases, budget cuts would fall very heavily on the poor and vulnerable -- at the very time they most needed government to strengthen, not weaken, the social safety net.

As we report below, the call for new revenue was heard, and resulted in a number of important revenue increases.

Health Care Victories - Overall, however, the biggest policy victories of the session came in the area of health care coverage and health care reform. This was one of the highest priorities of interfaith advocacy work in this session, and in past sessions.

Enacted - HB 2116 raised hospital and health insurance taxes in order to expand health coverage to 80,000 uninsured children, and an additional 35,000 low-income adults.

Enacted - HB 2009 began the process of implementing many of the recommendations of the *Oregon Health Fund Board* regarding reform of our health care system.



EMO also worked on several other issue areas this session including hunger, affordable housing, and family economic security; civil rights and religious freedom; and the environment. We outline the results in each of these areas below. There were significant victories, and a few set-backs as well.

Thank you for all your support and participation in faith-based advocacy efforts during this past session.

If you would like to make a contribution to Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon to support our Public Policy Advocacy program, you may do so by [clicking here](#). Be sure to select "Peace and Justice Advocacy" in the program box to direct your

donation to our program.

Most sincerely,

Kevin Finney
Public Policy Director

Additional Issue Areas

[Revenue Measures](#)

[Hunger Relief, Family Economic Stability and Affordable Housing](#)

[Preserve and Protect the Environment](#)

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Revenue Measures

We are pleased to report that the Legislature passed a number of important new revenue measures, some of which we discuss in other sections. Two measures, however, were the most important, and the most controversial:

Enacted - House Bill 2649 raises taxes on the top two percent of individual and joint tax filers, from a current top rate of nine percent to a new top rate of 10.8 percent on the income above \$125,000 for single filers and \$250,000 for joint returns, and 11 percent on the excess above \$250,000 for single filers and \$500,000 for joint returns. These rates would last four years, and then drop to 9.9 percent thereafter. We supported this measure because we believe it restores a measure of tax fairness and progressivity to Oregon's tax system, and that in hard times it is especially important for those who are still making a high income to do more to help those who are particularly hard hit by the economic downturn. This bill raises an estimated \$472 million for the 2009-11 biennium.

Enacted - House Bill 3405, Corporate Minimum Tax increase. This bill raises the corporate minimum tax, which was set at \$10 back in 1931, and establishes a sliding scale of \$150 to \$100,000 depending on net profits. A new permanent rate of 7.6 percent applies to corporations netting more than \$10 million starting in 2013. Taxes on the excess amounts go into the state reserve. This bill raises an estimated \$261 million for the 2009-11 biennium. EMO also supported this measure.

Anti-tax campaign looms: Business and anti-tax groups are organizing to refer both of these measures to the voters for reconsideration. If enough signatures are gathered, a special election will be held on January 26, 2010. EMO is likely to be actively involved in opposing efforts to overturn these tax increases.

Defeated: HB 2461 - the Beer Tax: EMO supported this measure that would have increased the excise tax on beer sold in Oregon for the first time in 32 years. Oregon currently has the fourth lowest beer tax in the nation, and the increase would have generated new revenue for alcohol and drug treatment programs, as well as for other public safety expenses, such as state troopers.

Hunger Relief, Family Economic Stability and Affordable Housing

There were some important victories for hunger relief, affordable housing, and family economic stability, but also a couple of important items left undone.

Enacted - Expansion of Free School Breakfast Program: the legislature increased state funding for free school breakfast programs by \$2.2 million -- which allowed children whose families make between 130 and 185% of poverty to be eligible for free school breakfasts, instead of reduced price breakfasts. This will greatly increase the number of low-income children taking advantage of this program, and it secures over \$4 million in matching federal funds. Much credit for this victory goes to the work of Patti Whitney-Wise and the *Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force*.



In two other areas -- funding for the Oregon Food Bank Network, and funding for the farmers market coupon program for seniors and WIC recipients -- we avoided any cuts to previous funding levels, but also failed to win expanded funding that was sought.

Enacted - HB 2436 Affordable Housing Funding: this bill increased the document recording fee in order to provide a dedicated revenue stream for programs to reduce homelessness, preserve and build affordable housing, provide rental assistance, and help first time homebuyers. It was the top priority of the *Oregon Housing Alliance*.

Enacted - SB 628 Foreclosure reduction: EMO also supported this bill which requires mortgage lenders to make a good faith effort to negotiate new mortgage repayment terms prior to foreclosing on most residential properties. An earlier version, which we preferred would have required third-party mediation to negotiate new repayment terms. But this compromise bill is still a step forward.

Left Undone -- SB 966, Paid Family Leave Insurance, and HB 2066, expanding state Earned Income Tax Credit: The biggest disappointments in this category were the failure to enact SB 966 which would have established a paid family leave insurance program, and the decision of the legislature not to act on increasing the state earned income tax credit. Both would have helped support low-income families in difficult times and aided in the reduction of childhood poverty.

Protect and Preserve the Environment

The 2009 legislative session was a mixed one for the environment. Important achievements were made, but equally important defeats also took place.



For example, **SB 80**, to establish a state cap and trade program to reduce global warming pollution **was weakened and then ultimately defeated**, despite the Governor's, and EMO's strong support, but **SB 79**, to begin a process of improving energy efficiency standards in state building codes **was enacted**.

SB 101, which establishes greenhouse gas emission limits for new power plants **was**

passed, but so was **HB 2940, which weakens the state's renewable energy standard** by allowing old biomass and trash burning plants to count against the standard, and another bill, **HB 3039, further weakened the renewable standard** by allowing solar energy generation to be double-credited -- effectively reducing the percentage of renewable energy required under the standard. Governor Kulongoski should be encouraged to veto HB 2940 and HB 3039.

Another example - HB 2999, strengthening the Pesticide Use Reporting program, was passed, but funding for this program was eliminated for the next two years.

For a full report on environmental legislation, visit the websites of the [Healthy Climate Partnership](#) and of the [Oregon Conservation Network](#).

Civil Rights and Religious Freedom



On the whole, this was a good session for civil rights and religious freedom issues. EMO supported the following three bills or programs passed or funded by the legislature this session:

Enacted - HB 2599, Anti-bullying: strengthens anti-bullying programs in public schools.

Enacted - SB 786, Workplace religious freedom: strengthens enforceability of existing requirements that employers make "reasonable" accommodations for employees who wish to observe religious holidays or wear religious clothing of some kind.

Enacted and Funded - Civil rights enforcement - EMO supported re-establishment of a Civil Rights Enforcement office in the state Department of Justice, and the legislature awarded sufficient funding to make this happen, and expanded civil rights enforcement within the Bureau of Labor and Industries (BOLI).