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TEXAS FAITH: Should gambling be expanded to cover state shortfall?

By Sam Hodges

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Rep. Jim Dunnam, D-Waco, recently described expanding gambling in Texas as the "elephant in the room" that no one wants to talk about as a way to deal with a momentous looming state budget shortfall. He called for a bi-partisan ad hoc committee to study "any and all" gambling proposals - no doubt including casinos and slot machines - before the next legislative session.

If Texas is looking at cutting spending on education, health care, and other vital services, is it wrong to turn to more gambling as a way of minimizing the damage?

That's the question we posed this week to Texas Faith panelists. Here's how they responded:

George Mason, senior pastor, Wilshire Baptist Church of Dallas

Okay, this drives me crazy. When we look for ways to address the state budget shortfall or to fund adequate education, health care, or anything else in Texas by appealing to and nurturing the worst impulses in our citizens, we fail on so many counts.

Let's begin with this: we are the state. The state is not some virtual behemoth that threatens to gobble up all that is good from us and spend it on all that is bad. We have a social contract with our neighbors that says we pay for what we agree is important. And the "we" is all of us.

Gambling - whether casino, slot machines, pari-mutuels, or lottery! - may be thought of benignly as mere entertainment that citizens choose freely to pay for without compulsion by the state. But that's not what happens. The state immediately seizes the opportunity to market the games, to entice more participation in "get-rich-quick" schemes that disproportionately hurt those who can't afford to be hurt by participating. The social consequences that result for families through gambling addiction and financial hardship, if not catastrophic, are terrible. And for the state to nurture this is unthinkable. And in the end, we pay again by supporting these broken families through public services of all kinds.

Every budget is a moral document. The state is a moral tutor, whether we like it or not. We should want Texans to go to school and work hard to achieve, to get jobs and perform them well, to make decisions in the best interests of their family and neighbors. Gambling undermines the work ethic and the moral responsibility that ties families and communities together. Advocating irresponsible behavior in some in order that the rest of us don't have to pay for what we all think is necessary - this is unconscionable.

Matthew Wilson, political science professor, Southern Methodist University

We should absolutely not rule out gambling in Texas as a way to enhance tourism, increase state revenues, and protect critical services. We already have a state lottery, so clearly the state is not opposed in principle to generating revenue through voluntary games of chance. My own religious tradition (Catholic) holds that gambling, like drinking alcohol, is not per se immoral; it only becomes problematic when done to excess, in ways that undermine virtue and compromise one's obligations to work, family, etc. Will some small portion of gamblers become compulsive? Certainly, in the same way that a small portion of drinkers will become alcoholics, and a much

larger portion of smokers will become addicts. This does not stop us, however, from funding vital state services with "sin taxes" on alcohol and tobacco, and certainly does not justify prohibition. In the current political climate, raising new revenues of any kind is extremely difficult; faced with a choice between increasing taxes or making draconian cuts to roads, hospitals, law enforcement, and universities, I fear that the legislature will opt for the latter. Given this reality, turning to the voluntary tax of gambling, something that many of the state's citizens enjoy responsibly (currently at out-of-state venues), seems to me a very attractive--and morally permissible--way out of the fiscal trap.

Katie Sherrod, independent writer/producer in Fort Worth

Given the horror with which Texas lawmakers regard tax increases, it is not surprising that they have dealt with previous state budget crunches by using some accounting and collection cleverness, such as moving up the due dates of the taxes we already had, or by paying state employees on the first day of the month instead of the last day of the month.

Now they are ready to gamble they can pull the trick off again, looking at expanding gambling opportunities, to produce expanded revenue. But that idea itself is a gamble, because if the economy does not bounce back, tax collections will remain flat. Worse, more people won't be able to gamble. You can't gamble away your paycheck if you're not getting a paycheck. In that case, even expanded gambling will not produce enough revenue to cover the expected shortfall.

Our lawmakers are of course ready to do almost anything to avoid raising taxes. One of the worst accusations you can make against a Texas lawmaker is to call him or her a "tax and spend" politician. But isn't it more moral to tax and spend than to borrow and spend? At least if we raise taxes to meet the revenue needs of our growing state, we are investing our money in ourselves - in the schools we use, the roads we drive on, the air we breathe, the water we drink.

It's called paying our own way, instead of relying on gamblers to pay the way for us.

Geoffrey Dennis, rabbi, Congregation Kol Ami in Flower Mound; faculty member, University of North Texas Jewish Studies Program

Jewish law recognizes that there are many kinds of gambling, from a game of dice between two people to buying and selling stocks, bonds, and options. Generally, a game of risk between two people is prohibited, most emphatically if one person in the game (a "casino" is not a concept the rabbis ever envisioned) is making a living solely by gambling.

On the other hand, gambles that involve purchasing a chance at winning an object of value - a car, say, in a raffle, or a portion of the cash contributions to a lottery - are considered permissible by a number of Jewish authorities when it is understood by the gambler(s) that any money risked and (likely) lost will go to some positive charitable or social purpose, such as building an addition to the synagogue, or financing public education.

Now how do we translate these perspectives into the odd hybrid of for-profit casinos (which provide no obvious positive social good, and may even be detrimental to the social weal) that pay a portion of their takings in taxes to fund our public programs? Which motive do we consider the primary nature of this gambling?

I'm inclined to see the personal profit motive as defining this enterprise, so I would not be in favor of expanding casinos and private gambling enterprises. Expanding state-run lotteries, which use the proceeds to underwrite needed social services, however, seems reasonable.

Lillian Pinkus, community volunteer

It is a mistake to turn to even more gambling as a way of covering our shortfalls. We have to learn as a country, states and individuals to live within our legitimate means.

While cutting funds meant to educate our kids should be among the last cuts we make, turning to gambling to finance education is just plain wrong. The breakdown of the family unit contributes to the educational woes we have in our country. Gambling puts families in danger by putting their earnings at risk. Far too often families are torn apart by financial problems, and gambling debts can play a role in that.

Yes, we are facing tough financial decisions. However, turning to gambling as a solution is like putting a dirty band-aid on an open wound.

William Lawrence, dean and professor of American church history, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University

Every religious community asks its adherents and constituents to embrace particular views on big social issues. The United Methodist Church, of which I am a member, is very clear in its pronouncement on this topic. Its Social Principles assert, "Gambling is a menace to society, deadly to the best interests of moral, social, economic, and spiritual life, destructive of good government and good stewardship. As an act of faith and concern, Christians should abstain from gambling and should strive to minister to those victimized by the practice."

Such statements by the denomination are intended to teach the church, but they are neither moral mandates nor church laws. And that is probably a good thing, because a lot of United Methodists would otherwise be regular lawbreakers--whether it involves a few dollars on the golf course, or an occasional office pool on the Final Four, or a lottery ticket to raise funds for a favorite public television station.

Nevertheless, this social principle of the denomination does further advise United Methodists to avoid resorting to commercial gambling as a means to support the government. And that is the issue immediately at hand--whether gambling might offer a way to address the revenue shortfall in Texas.

Essentially, as with all revenue questions in any state, the discussion comes down to this. Most citizens want and expect their state (and other) governments to provide vital services--high quality public schools, well-paved streets, public safety including the protections afforded by firefighters and police. And almost all citizens want people besides themselves to bear the lion's share of paying for these services. It is hard to recall any political candidate who was ever swept into office on a promise that included summoning people to pay higher fees or taxes. It is easy to recall many candidates who insisted that they could improve public services--a better military, a safer border, a superior business climate--without ever being held accountable to answer the question of how these costs will be paid.

The problem with turning to gambling as a revenue source is that it cannot really provide a stable revenue stream over a long period of time in sufficient measure to achieve a sizable net gain. Atlantic City, N.J., has had a difficult time managing its casino environments while coping with all of the consequences of casino-related problems. Market saturation is an increasingly serious consideration.

But the real problem with gambling lies in its being demonic. It promises what it cannot possibly deliver. Therefore, it is the creation of a phantom and a falsehood and a fraud. If we want excellent educational, social, and civic services, we will have to pay for them--not dream that others will fall victim to the phantoms that tempt them and relieve us of our responsibilities.

Bob Dean, executive director, Dallas Baptist Association

More Gambling is a bad deal for Texas.

It is a bad deal for the state budget. Many studies have shown that for every \$1 of benefit, there is \$3 of additional costs to society.

It is a bad deal for families. Gambling victimizes individuals and families suffer as a result. If Gambling is expanded in Texas, there will be more pathological gamblers who will bring untold hurt on spouses and children.

It is a bad deal for public safety. Expanded gambling in Texas would expand crime and corruption.

Amy Martin, executive director, Earth Rhythms; writer/editor, Moonlady Media

Our culture brims with temptations that are easy to imbibe to excess. Some are legal; some are not. Yet all can lead to mental, physical and financial ruin if dependency develops.

A fair approach that rates without cultural prejudice would probably indicate that gambling causes less harm than other legal vices. The need for fairness and consistency of approach in regulating vices is understandable. And if you're going to tax one you should tax them all. But I'm not an expert in this field.

The most devastating form of gambling is legal, practically unregulated and causes vast devastation to innocent parties. We call it Wall Street.

Joe Clifford, pastor, First Presbyterian Church of Dallas

In 1992, the Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly upheld over 40 years of policy declarations by issuing a statement petitioning civic and government leaders to resist state sanctioned gambling and the false promises for fiscal benefits from such, and encouraged state councils of churches and related public policy advocacy groups to be active in resisting the spread of legalized gambling. Their rationale was that legalized gambling undermines the principles of responsible Christian stewardship. Gambling also inevitably becomes a "poor tax" as the people least likely to be able to afford gambling losses end up bearing the burden for the social programs they fund. This is not the way to fund government.

Stewardship is an issue not only for individuals, but also for societies. Setting up the choice of education and healthcare spending versus legalized gambling establishes a false dichotomy. There are many other choices the Texas state government made that brought us to this point. In 2006, did anyone frame the choice of \$14 billion in property tax cuts or reducing education and healthcare spending when the Legislature made that decision? When the new business tax passed to make up for some of the tax cuts brought in far less revenue than anticipated, did anyone ask whether we should exempt an additional 40,000 small businesses from the tax or fund healthcare and education?

No. Those decisions combined with the recession to create today's problem. From a faith standpoint, they were all stewardship decisions. Given today's false dichotomy of choosing gambling or cutting education and healthcare, they were bad decisions. (Statistics quoted from Jason Embry's Op-Ed Piece, "Texas budget mess got started with 2006 property tax cut," published in the Austin Statesmen, 2/22/10)

Daniel Kanter, pastor, First Unitarian Church of Dallas

I grew up going to Atlantic City when the boardwalk was a family destination with the beach, saltwater taffy, and amusement rides. I went back years after the casinos took over only to find the city itself an experiment in poverty, the crime rates through the roof, and addiction centers doing a thriving business. Gambling itself has no inherent evil in it and can be rather fun. The problem with gambling often is that the unseen result of its presence is organized crime, how it promotes addiction of all sorts, and how it adversely affects the poor and poor communities. Would we be adding to the problems the state already has by making gambling legal? It is

possible we would create more problems than it would solve. Can't we think up ways to support state efforts to address basic issues of healthcare and education? What we need is to think less selfishly and dare I say it more 'socially' and find ways that we can take responsibility for the shortfalls in the safety net of our state services. I think there are better ways to make a dent in the social problems we have in Texas than inviting the gaming lobby to vie for our attention.

Darrell Bock, research professor of New Testament Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary

The issue may not be just gambling but what comes with it. What excessive gambling does to people, what type of people are involved in running it. Any study has to be very careful in looking at the issues tied to its presence. Those factors may well give pause.

Nityananda Chandra Das, minister, ISKCON Kalachandji's Hare Krishna Temple Dallas

Gambling, being based on untruthfulness, cheating, and open thievery, has no place in a government guided by spiritually enlightened leadership. How is gambling thievery? Gambling is a type of open theft - trying to get something for nothing. One should work honestly and accept what comes as God's mercy. One who understands the Law of Karma, that you reap what you sow, works honestly within this world knowing that one will get what they actually deserve. By dishonest work one may accrue more, however one becomes karmically obliged and produces karmic debts. Such a person gaining money by cheating will be then forced to lose his money by cheating, either in this life or the next.

A society is like a body, with working class the legs. The mercantile business class is the stomach for distribution of energies and supplies. The administrative class is the arms to provide protection and law. The intellectual class is the head to provide guidance. Currently society does not go by the direction from the intellectual class but rather from the stomach class. A body without a head will not survive; similarly a society without intelligence cannot prosper. What is intelligence? Intelligence is the ability to distinguish between the body from the soul. Those with this intelligence, who can comprehend the needs of the soul, not just the needs of the body, understand that the real damage to society is dishonesty, mercilessness, and lack of God consciousness.

Fuel does not put out a fire; rather, it only increases it. Similarly gambling only increases greed, which in turn increases the problems of the world. In retrospect, devotional service, serving God with pure love and devotion, is like a great cooling rainstorm. Such a rainstorm is the only effective means of putting out the forest fire of excessive material desires.

Cynthia Rigby, W.C. Brown Professor of Theology, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary

Yes, it is wrong to turn to more gambling as a way of minimizing the damage. Demographically speaking, gambling hurts most the very same families that are most adversely affected by cutbacks to education, health care, and other services. Any program devised to compensate for the cutbacks should aim only to enhance life, both in its final goal and in its journey toward this goal. Gambling is apt to destroy, rather than to enhance.

The question as posed - "If Texas is looking at cutting spending on education, health care, and other vital services, is it wrong to turn to more gambling as a way of minimizing the damage?" - puts the onus on those who are opposed to the expansion of gambling to make a case for why it is problematic. I argue, rather, that the onus is on those who want to argue FOR expanding such opportunities to make a case for why this makes sense, as a strategy. I think they will be hard put to make a strong case.

In addition, the question seems to imply that meeting important needs (education, health care, and vital services) somehow justifies any means (e.g., more gambling). If I'm right about this, then what is to prevent us from legalizing even more de-humanizing means than gambling, if we can rationalize that these means serve a better end?

Larry Bethune, pastor, University Baptist Church of Austin

The politicians are gaming us again. Gambling is a regressive form of taxation. The people who can least afford it are lured by the false hope of getting rich quickly. For many this temptation is not about greed but a desperate longing to escape chronic poverty in a culture whose advertisers constantly send the materialistic message that you are what you own.

Gambling robs the poor to give to the rich. Numerous tax breaks and incentives have been extended to the business sector to encourage corporations to move to Texas. Perhaps now is the time for business to pay its share.

Gambling robs from the poor to support the stingy. Many states balance their budgets with an income tax that justly and fairly spreads the burden across all citizens. While the income tax has been a political anathema in Texas, it is a healthier and more effective form of revenue than gambling. Texans can hold politicians responsible for the way public monies are spent, but all citizens benefit from public expenditures so all citizens should share in them.

Gambling robs from the poor to feed our addictions. It wreaks social havoc, encouraging addictions which wreck families, causes suffering that lasts generations, and inevitably requires further state funds to repair the tear in the social fabric. The income from gambling feeds our public addiction to finding ways to generate income for public expenditures that benefit all of us without most of us having to pay anything for them.

The damage done to the poor, the addicted, their families, and especially their children by increased gambling means using this form of revenue to balance the Texas budget isn't worth the gamble.