

Gambling and the Use of Gambling Money in Local United Church Fundraising

Does the United Church have rules about gambling?

A question many congregations struggle with more and more frequently is whether gambling is an acceptable way of raising funds. The issue usually arises in two situations:

- A group within the congregation wants to raise money for the congregation by holding a charitable raffle or maybe a Monte Carlo night.
- A congregation wants to make their building more accessible, but the public funds that could underwrite this are available only from provincial gambling revenues.

In these situations, the congregation's decision rests with the official board or session. The General Council has no specific jurisdiction over congregations regarding gambling. It has only advice to offer. The board of the congregation needs to make its own decision, just as it makes its own decisions regarding who it will baptize or marry, or its position on the consumption of alcohol on church property.

However, the General Council advice is clearly anti-gambling.

General Council policy for other courts of the church is longstanding. The General Council has opposed expansion of gambling—either for the benefit of the state, for commercial operators, or for charities—for many years. It has also asked church members and church-related bodies to refrain from using lotteries and gambling as a way of raising revenues. That means that General Council and other courts of the church, such as presbyteries or Conferences, do not seek government grants that would draw on gambling-generated revenues.

What kind of gambling are we talking about?

A United Church study done in the late 1970s on gambling urged the church to pay particular attention to the “big picture” developments in gambling. It focused less on quilt raffles, cake walks, and other activities internal to the congregation, and instead emphasized attention to “legalized gambling.” The 1977 General Council adopted a definition of gambling:

GAMBLING is a contract whereby loss or gain or exchange of something of value (property, or money, or money's worth) is staked on the issue or outcome of an artificially created chance or uncertain event:

- without reference to or determination by value or service or good will
- with consciousness of risk and hope of gain
- and with the gain of the winners being at the expense of the losers (even when it is with the mutual consent of the losers)....

(Record of Proceedings, 27th General Council, The United Church of Canada, 1977, p. 314.)

The General Council has clearly focused on the huge expansion of for-profit and government-sponsored gambling. However, that has spilled over into congregational decisions because congregations are under pressure to expand their finances, even through “charitable” gambling. Also many people feel there is an integrity issue at stake: *Is it a good idea to generate our own revenue from gambling, if we oppose governments doing it?*

What about government grants?

In the early 1990s, the General Council Executive conducted a review of church opinion on whether its gambling policy should be changed. The initial concern centred on churches that needed to pay for costly upgrades to buildings when provincial grants for these purposes were increasingly gambling-generated. The overwhelming opinion—especially among those who provided care for people affected by problem gambling—was that the church should not change its position. By the end of the study, the policy decision was as follows:

That the Executive of General Council urge formally constituted groups of The United Church of Canada to avoid applying for or using funds generated from lotteries, casinos, or other activities in the gaming industry. (*Minutes*, Executive of General Council, November, 1993, p. 145.)

Support for this policy grew stronger through the 1990s as provincial governments pressed to expand gambling as a government revenue generation program, and was reaffirmed at the 38th General Council in 2003.

How do congregations decide?

Congregations considering the issue have reported that they've made their decisions on the basis of several factors:

- 1. The potential for division in the congregation if they introduce gambling.*

In many congregations, the proposal to introduce gambling as a revenue generator comes from someone who has grown up in another faith tradition or in none. The debate on the issue tends to become a flashpoint for other underlying issues between newcomers and others.

- 2. Whether the congregation is holding a raffle amongst its own members or for the general public.*

Some congregations feel they can allow a craft group to raffle off a quilt among their own members. They see this non-governmental and contained form of gambling as a social event in which they try to raise a proper price for an item that represents an enormous amount of skill and work. However, they draw the line at using lotteries or raffles to generate money from people outside the church.

The question of fundraising versus outreach may also affect some congregations. The argument is that if the congregation is going to the general public to raise money for its operations, should it not be going to the general public to share the Good News? The results might be heightened awareness of the church's mission and growth in the public's participation in the congregation, rather than only in its fundraising venture.

- 3. The effect it may have on the congregation's reputation.*

Some congregations provide support to people who have a gambling problem. Some choose not to introduce gambling at all, out of respect for those people.

In some communities, problem gambling is a particularly conspicuous social problem. Therefore congregations are especially sensitive to the issue of generating their revenue from people who participate in both commercial and traditional charitable gambling. In others, government pressure to take commercial gambling into the community has made people wary of all kinds of gambling. Finally, in some communities, governments publish the lists of groups that receive grants based on gambling revenues.