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Faith Coalition Calls for Stronger Tobacco Prevention Efforts in Kentucky
Faith Leaders, Public Officials and Health Advocates Urge Higher Tobacco Tax,
Smoke-Free Workplace Laws & Funding for Tobacco Prevention

Frankfort, KY (May 31, 2006) – A coalition of Kentucky faith leaders, public officials and health advocates – called Kentucky Faith United to Reduce Tobacco Use – held a press conference today to call on Kentucky’s leaders to support proven measures to reduce the devastating toll of tobacco use in the state. The coalition urged implementation of the three policies recommended by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as most effective in reducing tobacco use: higher cigarette taxes, strong smoke-free workplace laws, and well-funded programs to prevent kids from starting to smoking and help smokers quit.

Today is World No Tobacco Day. To commemorate the day and the 24 people who die of tobacco-related illness in Kentucky every day, places of worship in communities across the state rang church bells/chimes 24 times at noon.

Data released last week by the state Department of Health showed that Kentucky has the highest adult smoking rate in the country, with 28.7 percent of Kentucky adults as current smokers. Kentucky also has the highest youth smoking rate in the country, with 27.9 percent of high school students as current smokers.

“We in the faith community cannot stand by while tobacco use devastates so many Kentucky families and so many of our children and adults are at risk because our state has the highest smoking rate in the nation,” said Reverend Dr. Nancy Jo Kemper of the Kentucky Council of Churches. “Our community leaders have a moral obligation to address this serious problem by taking action to protect the health of all citizens. We hope and pray that public officials will do what is right and act quickly to increase the tobacco tax, pass smoke-free air laws and fund tobacco prevention programs to protect all Kentuckians from tobacco. We know these solutions work.”

“We know what works to reduce the devastating toll of tobacco,” said Dr. William Hacker, Commissioner of the Kentucky Department for Public Health. “All that’s missing is the political will among our leaders to implement the policies that are proven to reduce smoking, save lives, and save money by reducing smoking-caused health care costs. We urge our leaders to listen to our call and take action to protect everyone from tobacco use, the number one preventable cause of death in our state and in our country.”

Kentucky’s 30-cent per pack cigarette tax is the fifth lowest in the nation and is well below the national average of 93.8 cents per pack. A significant cigarette tax increase is a win-win-win solution for Kentucky – a health win that will reduce tobacco use and tobacco-caused disease, death and health care costs; a financial win that will help fund important health programs and balance the budget; and a political win that polls show is popular with voters. Studies show that every 10 percent increase in the price of cigarettes reduces youth smoking by seven percent and overall cigarette consumption by about

four percent. Every state that has significantly increased its cigarette tax in recent years has enjoyed substantial increases in revenue, even while reducing cigarette sales.

The evidence is also clear that tobacco prevention is one of the smartest and most fiscally responsible investments that Kentucky can make. Tobacco prevention not only reduces smoking and saves lives; it is also part of the solution to the skyrocketing health care costs, especially under Medicaid, that are placing such a burden on state budgets. Tobacco costs Kentucky \$1.4 billion a year in health care bills, including \$448 million under Medicaid. The average Kentucky household pays \$567 a year in taxes because of smoking-caused government expenditures. Businesses pay even more because of higher health insurance costs and lost productivity. Funding tobacco prevention is one of the most important steps Kentucky can take to bring down these costs.

Kentucky currently spends \$2.7 million a year on tobacco prevention programs, which amounts to just 11 percent of the minimum amount of \$25.1 million recommended by the CDC. Kentucky's spending on tobacco prevention also amounts to just 1.1 percent of the \$248.5 million in tobacco revenue the state will collect this year from the 1998 state tobacco settlement and tobacco taxes.

The coalition also called on Kentucky's leaders to pass strong smoke-free workplace laws to protect the right of all Kentucky workers and families to breathe clean air. Secondhand smoke contains more than 4,000 chemicals and at least 69 known carcinogens and is scientifically proven to cause lung cancer, heart disease and other serious diseases. According to the CDC, it is responsible for at least 38,000 deaths nationwide each year.

"Tobacco does not discriminate and is a serious challenge to all major faiths, including Christians, Muslims and Jews," said Father Paul Scaglione of the Catholic Conference of Kentucky. "It is the leading preventable cause of death in our state, claiming more than 7,600 lives each year alone. More than 9,000 additional Kentucky kids become regular smokers every year. We urge our public officials to hear our calls and to take action to reduce this terrible toll."

For more information on Kentucky Faith United to Reduce Tobacco Use, please visit the website <http://www.kyfaithunitedtoreducetobaccouse.org>