

Bishop hopes to restart White House contraception talks

by [David Gibson](#)

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Bridgeport, Conn. (RNS) The Catholic bishop leading the push against the White House's contraception mandate says the bishops hope to restart contentious talks with the Obama administration, but cautioned that church leaders "have gotten mixed signals from the administration" and the situation "is very fluid."

Bishop William E. Lori of Bridgeport, Conn., who chairs the religious liberty committee of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, told Religion News Service that Catholics have to stay united if the hierarchy is to have any chance of prevailing in negotiations with the White House.

Ever since President Obama bowed to growing pressure and shifted the mandate to provide contraception mandate to insurance companies and away from religious employers, the White House has been hosting talks with various religious groups about a plan to modify the regulation.

Catholic institutions like hospitals, universities and social service agencies are most directly affected by the regulation because they are the biggest faith-based employers. They have also been much more amenable to the Obama accommodation than have the bishops.

Many bishops are upset with Catholic groups that have dealt independently with the administration, and some have also accused the administration of trying to divide the church.

"I think the hardest thing is that the administration deals with us in a segmented way," said Lori, who has testified before Congress three times in opposition to the mandate.

"If there is really going to be a solution to things, we ought to all be in the room," he said.

Lori said the bishops "do not have a monopoly on the church" but are nonetheless "responsible for a large part of how this works and for the Catholicity of all the institutions. So there ought to be an attempt to have an inclusive conversation with the Catholic Church, and not a segmented one. And I think that is in part why we are in a fairly unhappy spot right now."

Lori and some 40 other leading bishops will meet in Washington on Tuesday and Wednesday (March 13-14) for discussions expected to focus on relations with the White House and, in particular, the contraception mandate.

Lori said that the bishops "are not looking for a fight with the administration." The bishops, he said, "are painfully aware that it is awfully difficult, in an election year and in the culture we have now, to have that conversation" about birth control.

"Are we doing it perfectly? No, of course not. But that's certainly our intent."

He reiterated earlier criticisms by New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, president of the USCCB, who charged the administration with acting peremptorily in negotiations, and with wielding statements from Catholics that are critical of the bishops' stance.

Administration officials have rejected those charges, and say the White House "has sought the views of bishops on resolving difficult policy problems, only to be rebuffed."

Lori said that if there are "the conditions for the possibility of success," then the talks can move ahead.

"All of us want to have a civil and productive conversation here," he said. But he agreed with Dolan that "it isn't looking good, and that's too bad."

Lori said that barring an advance in talks with the White House, the bishops see hope of modifying or overturning the contraception mandate through the courts. He added that rallying Catholics "and public opinion in general" around the theme of religious freedom remains the church's best chance for changing the

mandate through legislation or by giving the bishops political leverage.

One problem for the bishops, however, is the shifting and unsettled political terrain. Thanks in large part to the ugly comments about women and contraception by conservative talk radio host Rush Limbaugh and others, public opinion seems to be swinging in favor of the administration's policies.

Congressional Republicans seem less eager to push legislation against the mandate, and the White House is exploiting this shift by courting women voters by reiterating the president's support for contraception coverage and abortion rights.

Lori noted that "there are points of agreement" between the administration and the bishops, such as on the need for health care reform.

"I think if we see the whole relationship only through the lens of the ... mandate, we will probably get a skewed view of it."