

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Senate

State House • Boston • 02133

April 20, 2007

President George W. Bush
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

We write to you today as members of the Massachusetts House of Representatives and Senate, concerned about a problem of religious freedom for the Orthodox Church in Turkey. Without timely action by the United States, one of the world's greatest denominations of Christianity may be faced with a terrible crisis.

Since 1844, the premier center for Orthodox learning and thought has been the Theological Seminary at Halki. Located on the Turkish island of Heybeliada in the Sea of Marmara, most of the Orthodox Church's recent leaders have graduated from this school, including the current head of the church, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholemew I.

The School at Halki is the only Orthodox theological school in Turkey. It is of extreme importance because, according to the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne between Turkey and Greece, the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Orthodox Church must be a citizen of Turkey. The Orthodox Church claims 300 million adherents worldwide, including 5 million in the United States and 150,000 in Massachusetts; of those, only several thousand are citizens of Turkey, dramatically limiting the number of believers eligible for the Patriarchy.

In 1971, the Turkish government closed the Halki Seminary to new students. When the last existing students graduated in 1985, the Orthodox Church lost its only means of preparing Orthodox students to join the clergy and lead the church. Because of the closure, there may not be an eligible successor to the current Ecumenical Patriarch, and the Orthodox Church may face a theological crisis.

We believe that this closure is incompatible with the respect for religious freedom embodied in the 1923 peace treaty. While Turkey's conduct is arguably within the strict terms of the Treaty of Lausanne, its 1971 closure of Halki is a tremendous and perhaps fatal blow to the Orthodox Church, and one that cannot be reconciled with the overarching principle of the treaty: Greece's respect for Muslim minorities, and Turkey's respect for non-Muslim minorities.

The United States has historically stood as a beacon of religious tolerance to the world. We ask that you continue to honor that tradition by asking Turkey to demonstrate a willingness to adopt and uphold international standards for the protection of human rights by allowing the Theological Seminary at Halki to reopen. The reopening of the Halki Seminary will allow one of the world's great religions to continue unimpeded by state interference.

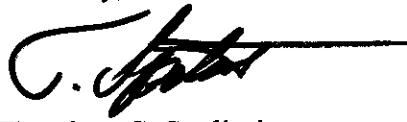
We appreciate the delicacy of applying any pressure to Turkey in the current world climate. We understand that the recent tumult over the Armenian Genocide Resolution in the Congress may make it difficult to broach another minority rights issue with the Turkish government. However, the stakes in this dispute – the fate of the Orthodox Christian Church – impel us to request your assistance regardless of these political obstacles.

We are grateful for any attention that you can give to this matter. If any of us may be of any assistance in this matter, please do not hesitate to call on us.

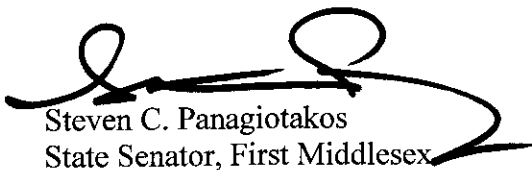


Bruce E. Tarr
State Senator, First Essex and Middlesex

Sincerely,



Theodore C. Speliotis
State Representative, 13th Essex



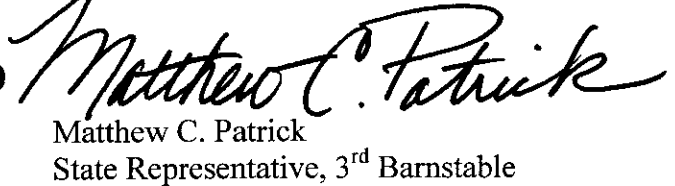
Steven C. Panagiotakos
State Senator, First Middlesex



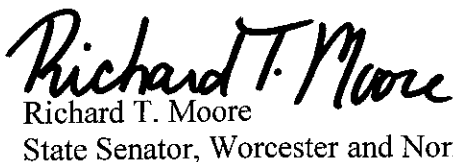
Harriette L. Chandler
State Senator, First Worcester



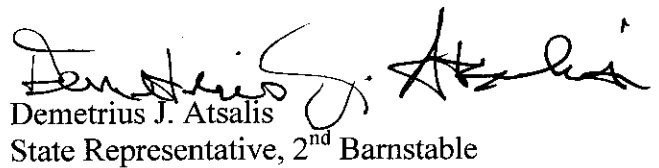
Jarrett T. Barrios
State Senator, Middlesex, Suffolk, and Essex



Matthew C. Patrick
State Representative, 3rd Barnstable



Richard T. Moore
State Senator, Worcester and Norfolk



Demetrius J. Atsalis
State Representative, 2nd Barnstable