

Briefly noted

News in the [June 27, 2006](#) issue

The first national, in-depth study of health services provided by religious communities is being undertaken by the National Council of Churches. The project will survey more than 100,000 Christian, Jewish and Muslim congregations to determine the level of health care education, delivery and advocacy being offered. The study, funded by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, will be conducted by Eileen W. Lindner, deputy general secretary of the NCC and head of its research office. “This study will give us the first real snapshot of just what faith-based activities there are in the health care arena,” she said.

A California Catholic priest who implied that kneeling during mass is a “mortal sin” has expressed regret for “misuse of the term.” At least 55 elderly parishioners at the Orange County church where Martin Tran is pastor have insisted on kneeling in reverence during some parts of the mass—a practice not in keeping with updated church norms, according to a May 28 article in the *Los Angeles Times*. In a church bulletin, Tran said the kneeling Catholics’ actions were “clearly rebellion, grave disobedience and mortal sin.” Catholic teachings define “mortal sin” as a most serious offense. For centuries, Catholics knelt during the liturgy when the priest held up the chalice and the consecrated bread and said, “Behold the Lamb of God.” The Vatican four years ago gave local bishops the option of deciding at certain points whether worshipers should kneel. U.S. bishops have taken the position that standing is just as respectful as kneeling, the *Times* said.

Church and labor activists who conducted a successful four-year boycott against a Taco Bell subsidiary to boost farmworker wages have begun to challenge fast-foot giant McDonald’s over its tomato supply-chain practices. McDonald’s insists that its counterproposal, which focuses on improved benefits, would “meet or exceed” the penny-per-pound increase proposed by the Coalition of Immokalee (Florida) Workers, which rejected the corporation’s offer. Members of the Alliance for Fair Food, which includes Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) representatives, say that farmworkers working for McDonald’s suppliers earn 40-45 cents for every 32-pound bucket of tomatoes they harvest, “a wage that has remained stagnant for more than

25 years,” according to an Alliance statement in late May. The critics asked McDonald’s to work directly with the worker coalition in order to create humanitarian conditions.

By a narrow majority (322 to 314), the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian) has become the first major church in Britain to formally allow its ministers to bless gay relationships. The fiercely contested May 23 General Assembly decision is provisional, however, and will have to be approved by a majority of the church’s 49 regional presbyteries prior to coming before next year’s assembly for final approval. The question arose as the result of the 2005 Civil Partnership Act, which allows same-sex couples in the United Kingdom to register their partnership in a civil ceremony. However, until now ministers who blessed those relationships ran the risk of disciplinary proceedings.