Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

May 28, 2009

The Honorable John E. Porter
Chairman of the Board
Public Broadcasting Service
2100 Crystal Drive
Arlington, VA 22202

Dear Chairman Porter:

On May 16, 2009, *The Washington Post* published a story titled "PBS Weighs Separation of Church & Stations." This story detailed the PBS board's plan to vote next month on a proposal endorsed by the Station Services Committee to strip the PBS affiliation from any station that carries "sectarian" content, such as local religious services.

PBS employees have explained to congressional staffers that this story overstates the current status of any proposal, and that you are currently in a feedback-gathering stage. It is our understanding that member stations are being asked how to interpret the current PBS membership policy, adopted in 1985 and renewed in 1995, which states that member stations must provide "a nonsectarian, nonpolitical, noncommercial educational program service."

We write to you today to convey our belief that any interpretation of your policy that would require stations to choose between airing church services, a long-established practice of PBS affiliates, and their PBS affiliation would be both unnecessary and wrong-headed. Numerous stations currently broadcast local religious services, such as "Mass for Shut-Ins," broadcast by WHUT in Washington, DC, and the daily "BYU Devotional" shown by KBYU in Provo, Utah. Most of these stations have been airing these programs for decades, and the appearances are a very small proportion of the overall broadcast on those individual stations – certainly not a trend that threatens to dominate PBS stations. There simply is no compelling reason for punishing these stations by forcing them to choose between programming that many depend on, including the disabled and elderly who are not able to make it in person to church services, and the PBS affiliation.

Public Broadcasting Service Program Policies established in 1987 state, "No one is better qualified to determine and respond to [] local needs than the public television station licensed to that community." PBS staff has reaffirmed that policy, stating that PBS's first goal is to work with member stations. It is our hope that you will continue to allow those stations that choose to air these established religious broadcasts, in line with the viewing wishes of their local viewing communities, to do so.

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As you know, PBS is a major recipient of funds from the Corporation of Public Broadcasting, which in turn receives funding from the American taxpayer. In the statute establishing CPB, Congress found and declared that "it furthers the general welfare to encourage public telecommunications services which will be responsive to the interests of people both in particular localities and throughout the United States ...."

Congressional staff has been informed that the Station Services Committee will issue its recommendation on this matter on June 15, with a board vote taking place the following day. In line with congressional intent in establishing the taxpayer-funded Corporation for Public Broadcasting and in the interest of full transparency to the American people, we request that you make publicly available the recommendation of the Station Services Committee for a minimum of 30 days prior to the board's vote on that proposal, so that the American people may have a chance to express their opinions about the recommendation. We also request that you respond to this letter by Thursday, June 12, informing us of your plans surrounding this proposal, including the dates on which the Committee shall issue its advice and on which the board will vote on that recommendation.

Thank you for your attention and timely response to this request.

Sincerely,

Eric Cantor

John Boehner

Thomas Price

Charles Melancon

Joe Pitts

Lamar Smith

Roy Blunt

J. Randy Forbes

Jeans W. Childers

Marsha Blackburn

Chris Cox

Randall Neugebauer

John Sullivan

Paul Ryan

Sam Johnson

Zach Wamp

Mike Ross

John Boozman

Randy Neugebauer

Michele Bachmann

Dr. Todd Akin

Phil Gingrey

Rob Bishop

Joe Wilson

Kenny Marchant

K. Brady

Aaron Schock

Doug Lamborn

Jim Jordan

Pete Olson

Walter B. Jones

Cc: Patricia Harrison, President/Chief Executive Officer, Corporation for Public Broadcasting
Paula Kerger, Chief Executive Officer, Public Broadcasting System