



Moral Values that Can Change the World: Reflections on Faith and the Common Good

Is There No Balm in Gilead? Health Care for *ALL* God's Children

California is deliberating what health care plan serves the greatest good for state residents. Two legislative plans propose either to offer private insurance through all employers or to provide universal health insurance through the state as the sole payer. Other proposals, not yet legislative, are to mandate all people carry health insurance or to create health care 'savings accounts.' Each plan challenges us to define our values around key principles: Who is entitled to have access to full medical coverage? Is health care a commodity we should buy like any other? Who should pay for health coverage and how? What role does 'affordability' play in premium costs, deductibles, and co-pays in terms of access? Who decides which of us gets access, which of us gets care?

What is clear is that the current system does not work. California has 7 million residents who have insufficient or no health insurance. Nearly 80 percent of the uninsured are full-time working people. Over half of all personal bankruptcies are due to health care costs, even among those who believed they were insured. Uninsured adults and children tend to wait before seeking medical treatment thereby becoming more ill — and more expensive — when they do. Undocumented immigrants cannot obtain routine health care but are legally entitled to emergency care for life-threatening illness which is too often their fate. The uninsured are less healthy, less productive, and live less long than the rest of us. They also are not stereotypical; they are our neighbors, our divorced or widowed friends, those whose employers have stopped or cut coverage, the children in our schools. They are the young, the old, and the employed. It could be any one of us.



These issues are policy questions. For the faith community, however, they are fundamentally moral issues. At the heart of any policy we choose lie questions about the value of life, the balance between individual and societal responsibility, the issue of whether we rely on a market system and individual chance in that market. Do we look to

government as an instrument of our society to help find the solution? We are all familiar with the story of the Good Samaritan, the foundation of the Golden Rule, and the mandate that we are our brother's/sister's keeper. Can social policy rest on these fundamental principles? Can we shape a policy without them?

Theological Reflection

Finding scriptural references that guide us in creating a health care system is sometimes difficult. Most healing in the Bible is miraculous which, while inspiring, is not much help in creating a very human health policy. We must, therefore, look more deeply. The directive to heal the sick permeates the biblical record. In *Matthew 10*, Jesus sent his disciples out first to heal the sick — then to spread the Gospel. Taking care of the health needs of all people becomes the predicate to lifting up faith. Throughout the Bible, God directs that the righteous mete out justice and fairness for all people, and assuring health is a core concern. *Jeremiah 8:22* asks, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?” *Isaiah 65:17-20, 23* says, “I will rejoice in Jerusalem and delight in my people... No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime.”

Healing the sick is commanded without reservation. All faith traditions share that commitment. The Interfaith Los Angeles Council of Religious Leaders assert in their Theological Statement on Health Care that “our traditions call us to protect the wellbeing of every human life... health care must be universal, continuous, affordable, sustainable (and)... ensure health and well-being.” While we tend to think of ‘stewardship’ and ‘care for creation’ as pertaining to our environment, these principles are essential to how we care for one another as well.



We live in a competitive market economy, but that cannot surpass our call to be inclusive and compassionate to all. Healthy people contribute to the wholeness of God's creation; health is part of the Common Good. Assuring health is a shared responsibility of individuals and of those who provide access to health care. Health is a state of wholeness and completeness for individuals and for society. It cannot exist for just the few. It is part of what assures our humanity and part of our greatest profession of faith.

Jesus sent 70 of his followers into the country and said, “Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you, cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The realm of God has come near to you.’” (*Luke 10:1-20*)

Conclusion

During the next two years, we will be offered a number of often-competing policy choices around health care. We will no doubt be bombarded with advertising and debates over each position, hear scare stories and promises galore. We can all have a significant role in shaping the decisions that will be made. We will need to weigh each legislative



and policy proposal against the moral values of inclusiveness, full access, sustainability, and affordability. We need to be committed to raising our voice not just for specific policies but for the moral values any given policy assures or betrays. Through our collective advocacy, we speak not just for ourselves but for the well-being of all our state's people. By standing on our time-honored faith traditions and beliefs, we can raise the level

of discourse around our pending health care decisions and help assure that those decisions are made, not for narrow self-interest and gain, but in and for the best interests of all. Our faith principles and values can be the highest test by which we help our legislators and ourselves measure each policy and each outcome.

Questions for Discussion

1. Can we have a truly moral health care system if some people remain uninsured or underinsured?
2. Should everyone contribute a share to the cost of health care coverage? If so, should it be 'progressive' based on ability to pay, or a flat fee everyone must pay?
3. Proposals such as health savings accounts let people set aside tax-free money (\$5000 is the usual target) to cover health costs. Is this an answer? Why or why not?
4. Is health care a right or a privilege? How do we reconcile either position with our faith principles?



Resources for Further Study on Health Care

Being the Good Samaritan: Health Access for All Californians, 2nd ed.

The California Council of Churches congregational study guide. Online at:

http://www.calchurches.org/publication_pdfs/HealthAccessGuide.pdf

May be ordered from CCC by writing to us or calling 916.488.7300 ext. 3.

Background readings in health from faith and secular sources.

<http://www.calchurches.org/healthcare/healthcarebackgroundreading.htm>

Sermon on universal health care from Rev. Jim Burklo.

<http://www.calchurches.org/healthcare/burklofaithandhealthcare.htm>

Health and Hope — A Study Guide for Wisconsin Congregations.

Online at: <http://www.wichurches.org/healthcare.html#body2>

University of Southern California Center for Religion and Civic Culture,
Theological Statements on Health Care:

http://www.usc.edu/schools/college/crcc/health/theological_reflections/

Faithful Reform in Health Care.

A national online movement to have the faith voice present in all health care plans.

<http://www.faithfulreform.org/>

Faith in Public Life: Health care resources.

http://www.faithinpubliclife.org/content/issues/health_care/

Families USA-Faith-based Resources. The pre-eminent national health advocacy organization's faith links:

<http://www.familiesusa.org/resource-centers/faith-based-resources/key-contacts.html>

If you do not have access to a computer to download these resources, we can send them to you. Just let us know and, if you can, include a donation to cover the cost of postage.

This discussion guide is one in a series of occasional one-session resources to help congregations engage in discussion around important contemporary social justice issues from a faith perspective