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Pulling Together On Health Care

Some community organizations and national faith groups are joining forces and setting aside differences to promote congressional action on what they consider a moral imperative.

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Several large coalitions are mobilizing religious communities nationwide in support of overhauling the nation's health-care system.

In recent weeks, hundreds of clergy members and lay leaders have descended on the offices of members of Congress, urging lawmakers to enact health-care legislation this year. With face-to-face lobbying, sermons, prayer and advertising on Christian radio stations, the coalitions are pressing the idea that health care for everyone is a fundamental moral issue.

But organizing groups with disparate religious beliefs around a single goal has been challenging. The coalitions have had to tiptoe around sensitive issues, such as whether to support a government-run health insurance option and whether government-subsidized plans should pay for abortions. They have also had to deal with some clergy members' fears of offending their congregations by speaking out for universal health care.

"It's a pretty radical step for this congregation to get involved in the public arena," said the Rev. Jennifer Thomas, who is pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church, a largely middle-class congregation in Kansas City, Mo., and is also a leader in one collection of grass-roots community and national religious groups. "A few members wonder how much the church should be involved."

The efforts have been coordinated closely with the Obama administration. A group of faith leaders met with President Obama in April, and administration officials took part last month in a rally at Freedom Plaza with representatives of more than 40 denominations and faith groups in support of comprehensive health coverage.

Showing up at the rally were Joshua DuBois, executive director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, and Neera Tanden, senior adviser to the Department of Health and Human Services.

"Your united voice is critical," Tanden told the gathering. "We are, in the next two months, at the most critical time of trying to get [health-care] legislation passed."

One coalition of mostly liberal and centrist religious groups was organized by Sojourners, an evangelical group; **Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good**; **Faith in Public Life**, a Washington think tank; and **PICO National Network**, an alliance of 1,000 U.S. congregations. It originally grew out of frustration that conservative Christian groups were dominating the national faith conversation on social issues. The coalition is speaking out on such issues as health-care reform and comprehensive immigration reform.

"We don't want to create a culture war. We want to dismantle it. We want to put faith, and not politics, first," said the Rev. Jennifer Butler, executive director of **Faith in Public Life**.

In a guide for leaders and members of participating congregations, the coalition uses biblical teachings to make the case that the nation's health-care system is in urgent need of repair.

"The Bible does not outline specific public policies around the provision of health care, but it does make clear that protecting the health of each human being is a profoundly important personal and communal responsibility for people of faith," says the brochure, "A Guide to the Health Care Reform Debate." "Physical healing was a part of the salvation Jesus brought. . . . Healings represent a sign of the breaking of God's reign into the present reality."

Conservative Christian groups say the coalitions are using the common language of faith to disguise unpopular ideas.

"I don't think they speak for the vast majority of Americans," said Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, who has debated the Rev. Jim Wallis, executive director of Sojourners, several times on the health-care issue. "They are playing on the sympathies and passions of most Christians."

Another large pro-reform alliance, Faithful Reform in Health Care, made up of 40 religious organizations, has called for worshipers in its member congregations to "pray for those who are left out of our health-care system -- and for those with the power to enact change." The group is holding candlelight vigils at state legislative buildings and recently sent letters to all members of Congress laying out what its executive director, the Rev. Linda Hanna Walling, calls a "faith-inspired vision of health care." Members also plan to visit lawmakers when they are home during Congress's August recess.

The coalition that includes **PICO** has tried to identify members of Congress who can be persuaded to support health-care legislation. Pastors in seven states recorded radio ads promoting reform efforts that aired over the Memorial Day and Fourth of July recesses.

The message, said **PICO** spokesman Gordon Whitman, is this: "Religious voters support health-care reform, and you can't take them for granted. We're not going to allow people who stand up for health reform to be attacked on religious grounds. If you are in a district or state that is culturally conservative, there is support for health reform."

In August, paid organizers will meet with pastors to help them organize their congregations, develop talking points for meetings with members of Congress and coordinate with other groups and individuals -- religious and secular.

Among their congressional targets are Sen. Kay Hagan (D-N.C.), who sits on one of the committees working on the health-care package; Sen. Richard G. Lugar (R-Ind.), who has warned against moving too fast to overhaul the health-care system; and Sen. Michael Bennet (R-Colo.), who has said he wants to accomplish reform "without breaking the bank."

To hold together their diverse memberships, the coalitions are moving carefully around controversial issues. For example, Sojourners, **Faith in Public Life**, **Catholics in Alliance** and **PICO** are supporting the "status quo" on abortion -- neither requiring nor banning insurers from covering the procedure as long as federal funds are not used. Their coalition has not endorsed specific legislation, although it might if a proposal appears to meet its goals, leaders said.

"We try to stay away from broad ideological fights," Whitman said, "and stay where there is common ground."