



**Washington Office**

**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

God's work. Our hands.

June 1, 2009

Dear Lutheran Advocate –

Thank you for showing interest in advocating for a better health care system! This toolkit is designed to help you raise this issue with your congregation in the context of a worship service.

June 2009 will be an especially important month in the health care policy discussion, and so it is crucial for people of faith from across the country to unite together as a voice for change. Plans are underway for the largest faith-inspired mobilization for health care reform EVER, to be held in Washington, DC on June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2009 (<http://www.webelievetogether.org/>). We are asking Lutherans to join this effort by raising awareness of health care issues in their own communities and congregations the entire month of June (and even beyond).

Hosting a **Health Care Sunday** can take many forms, from including a simple prayer to planning a full service around a health care theme. Here are some ideas for what you can do:

1. Include a health-themed prayer, litany, hymn, or special petition(s) in Prayers for the People in your normal worship service (see pages 3-9).
2. Include the health care bulletin insert with your weekly bulletin (see page 2).
3. Invite someone to speak on healthcare, include testimonies from individuals affected in the service, or ask your pastor to preach on the topic (see pages 10-13).
4. **Host a Health Care Café after worship or during the week.** Transform a Bible study, men's or women's group, Adult Forum, youth group, or even an informal gathering of friends into a space to discuss health and health care reform. For discussion guides and activity suggestions, see our Health Care Café toolkit at [www.elca.org/advocacy](http://www.elca.org/advocacy).

**Once you decide what makes most sense for your congregation, please let us know what you do**, no matter how simple. Letting us know what you do helps us track what Lutherans around the country are doing and allows us to encourage others by our combined effort. Even a small contribution, multiplied around the country, will send a powerful message to our representatives in Congress that health care is a moral issue that is important to people of faith and conscience. Everyone can be a part of this nationwide movement, and the time to plan your involvement is NOW!

We're here to help in any ways we can. Your voice, leadership, and moral courage are necessary to show our members of Congress that Lutherans are informed and engaged as we work for health care reform!

Health and Peace,

Robert Francis  
Director for Domestic Policy

Kelly Meredith  
Hunger Fellow, ELCA Washington Office

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A **Health Care Sunday** is a great opportunity to come together in body and spirit to learn, share, and pray as a community of faith. This toolkit provides a variety of resources to help bring attention, in the context of worship, to the call of the church to seek the health and healing of all people. This is especially timely now, as the federal government considers comprehensive reform of the U.S. health care system in 2009.

A **Health Care Sunday** also is a way to affirm and support one of the missions of the ELCA. As the ELCA social statement on health and healthcare states, “We of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America have an enduring commitment to work for and support health care for all people as a shared endeavor. Our commitment comes in grateful response to God’s saving love in Jesus Christ that frees us to love and seek the well-being of our neighbor. It is shaped by the witness of Scripture—including the ministry of Jesus—and the Lutheran Confessions, together with the Christian Church’s historical and contemporary ministry in healing and health.”\*

### **This Health Care Sunday Toolkit Includes:**

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For additional Health Care Sunday resources, see the following websites:

Faithful Reform in Health Care: [www.faithfulreform.org](http://www.faithfulreform.org)

Campaign for Better Health Care’s Faith Caucus:

<http://www.cbhconline.org/issues/hcjc/faith.html>

Cover All Families (A Project of the PICO National Network): [www.coverallfamilies.org](http://www.coverallfamilies.org)

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\* The full social statement, “Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor,” is available at <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/Health-and-Healthcare.aspx>.



## Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

### Health Care Reform: A Matter of Responsibility, Faith, and Justice

“Health is central to our well-being, vital to relationships, and helps us live out our vocations in family, work, and community. Caring for one’s own health is a matter of human necessity and good stewardship. Caring for the health of others expresses both love for our neighbors and responsibility for a just society. As a personal and social responsibility, health care is a shared endeavor.”<sup>1</sup>

#### ELCA Social Statement on Health and Health Care

In 2003, the ELCA adopted a social statement on health and health care entitled, “Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor,” which affirms that the “Christian Church is called to be an active participant in fashioning a just and effective health care system.” It affirms that “we of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America have an enduring commitment to work for and support health care for all people as a shared endeavor.” At minimum, “each person should have ready access to basic health care services that include preventive, acute, and chronic physical and mental health care at an affordable cost.”

#### The Urgency

“Health care in the United States... suffers from a prolonged crisis.” Rising health care costs leave a growing number of people without adequate health care, including the nearly 50 million people who are uninsured. Health care resources often are only available based on ability to pay rather than need. Finding access to quality health care services is difficult for many. And the costs of health care threaten the financial health of millions of individuals and families and the long-term financial stability of our nation.

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes from “Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor,” an ELCA social statement on health, healing, and health care. The full statement is available at <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/Health-and-Healthcare.aspx>.

#### Where We Stand

As people of faith, we believe that access to quality, affordable health care should not depend upon where a person works, how much a family earns, or where a person lives. Instead, every person, created in the image and likeness of God, should have access to the things necessary to sustain life and reach his or her God-given potential, including affordable, quality health care. Therefore, we urge all our leaders, regardless of political party or philosophy, to join in the commitment and conversation to achieve meaningful health care reform this year.

#### Three Things You Can Do

1. **Contemplate!**
  - a. Pray for those affected by poor health, inadequate access to health care, and lack of health care coverage.
  - b. Journal about your own health story, including your experience with the health care system. What worked well? What did not? What would you change, and what would you keep the same?
2. **Educate!**
  - a. Read and consider the ELCA Social Statement on health and health care, “Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor.”
  - b. Organize a “Health Care Café” in your congregation. For more information, including materials and idea suggestions, contact Robert Francis at [robert.francis@elca.org](mailto:robert.francis@elca.org) or (202) 626-7936.
3. **Advocate!**
  - a. Go to [www.elca.org/advocacy](http://www.elca.org/advocacy) to join the ELCA’s e-advocacy network to receive updates from the ELCA Washington Office about health care reform.
  - b. Send a letter or email to your Senators and Representative, telling your own story and urging them to pass comprehensive health care reform this year.

For more information, contact Robert Francis, the ELCA’s Director for Domestic Policy, at [robert.francis@elca.org](mailto:robert.francis@elca.org) or (202) 626-7936 and visit our website at [www.elca.org/advocacy](http://www.elca.org/advocacy).

## PRAYERS

The following prayers are adapted from a number of Christian denominations. Use during worship, to open or close group meetings centered on health and health care. For permission to use prayers listed from Evangelical Lutheran Worship or Lutheran Book of Worship, contact Augsburg Fortress publishers, [copyright@augzburgfortress.org](mailto:copyright@augzburgfortress.org).

### ***A Prayer for Health of Body and Soul:***

By your power, great God, our Lord Jesus healed the sick and gave new hope to the hopeless. Though we cannot command or possess your power, we pray for those who want to be healed. Mend their wounds, soothe fevered brows and make broken people whole again. Help us to welcome every healing as a sign that, though death is against us, you are for us, and have promised renewed and risen life in Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.

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### ***A Prayer for the Poor and the Neglected:***

Almighty and most merciful God, we call to mind before you all those whom it would be easy to forget: the homeless, the destitute, the sick, the aged and all who have none to care for them. Help us to heal those who are broken in body or spirit, and to turn their sorrow into joy. Grant this, Father, for the love of your Son, who for our sake became poor, Jesus Christ our Lord.

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### ***A Prayer for those in Affliction***

Almighty and everlasting God, comfort of the sad and strength to those who suffer: Let the prayers of your children who are in any trouble rise to you. To everyone in distress grant mercy, grant relief, grant refreshment; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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### ***A Prayer for Caregivers and Others who Support the Sick:***

God, our refuge and strength, our present help in time of trouble, care for those who tend the needs of the sick. Strengthen them in body and spirit. Refresh them when weary; console them when anxious; comfort them in grief; and hearten them in discouragement. Be with us all, and give us peace at all times and in every way; through Christ our peace. Amen.

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### ***A Prayer for the Chronically Ill and Those who Support Them:***

Loving God, your heart overflows with compassion for your whole creation. Pour out your Spirit on all people living with illness for which there is no cure, as well as their families and loved ones. Help them to know that you claim them as your own and deliver them from fear and pain; for the sake of Jesus Christ, our healer and Lord. Amen.

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***Prayer for Health Care Providers:***

Merciful God, your healing power is everywhere about us. Strengthen those who work among the sick; give them courage and confidence in all they do. Encourage them when their efforts seem futile or when death prevails. Increase their trust in your power even to overcome death and pain and crying. May they be thankful for every sign of health you give, and humble before the mystery of your healing grace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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***Recovery from Sickness:***

Almighty and merciful God, you are the only source of health and healing; you alone can bring calmness and peace. Grant to us, your children, an awareness of your presence and a strong confidence in you. In our pain, our weariness, and our anxiety, surround us with your care, protect us by your loving might, and permit us once more to enjoy health and strength and peace; through Jesus Christ, our savior and Lord. Amen.

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***A Prayer of Restoration of Health:***

O Lord, your compassions never fail and your mercies are new every morning. We give you thanks for giving our sister/brother both relief from pain and hope of health renewed. Continue in her/him the good work you have begun; that she/he, daily increasing in bodily strength and rejoicing in your goodness, may so order her/his life and conduct that she/he may always think and do those things that please you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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***Prayers of the People:***

We know God's desires for our health and wholeness through Jesus Christ, who healed the sick in mind, body, and spirit. Let us pray to the Lord, saying "Lord make us whole."

For the Universal Church, that in the name of Jesus who healed the sick and welcomed the outcasts, we minister to all who suffer in mind, body, and spirit and call for care that excludes none, we pray to the Lord.

*Lord, make us whole.*

For our nation and our leaders, that we assure health care for everyone and so doing discover that true strength comes from ensuring justice and compassion for all and not just for some, we pray to the Lord.

*Lord, make us whole.*

For people everywhere, in a world where disease knows no borders, suffering is a shared language, health care is a common need, and good health is a universal hope, we pray to the Lord.

*Lord, make us whole.*

For ourselves and our local community, that we don't pass by the problems of others but work together to solve the problems that afflict our neighbors, offering comfort and care, support and solidarity, advocacy and action to heal the broken places, we pray to the Lord.

*Lord, make us whole.*

For all who are uninsured, that they find strength and hope in you and justice and care from your people, we pray to the Lord.

*Lord, make us whole.*

For those who suffer, especially the sick, that they are sustained by faith and served with care by doctors and nurses acting as agents of your love, we pray to the Lord.

*Lord, make us whole.*

For all who have died in the hope of resurrection, especially those who died for lack of care, and for the loved ones who grieve in their passing, we pray to the Lord.

*Lord, make us whole. Amen.*

*[Episcopal Rubric]*

### ***Prayer of Confession***

Loving God, we come to you this day confessing that we have not always loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are aware of people suffering for lack of health care, and yet we pass by on the other side. We know there are children who struggle to grow and learn with untreated health problems, and yet we pass by on the other side. Families are crushed by medical bills and other financial burdens, yet we pass by on the other side. When we encounter troubling situations that we don't know how to fix, we are tempted to pass by on the other side. Stop us in our tracks, O God, and open our hearts so that we are not afraid to get involved in meeting the needs of those who are being ignored. Make our hearts bold and loving and send us in the name of your Son to go and do likewise. Amen.

*[Shannon Daley-Harris, Cover the Uninsured Christian Action Kit 2005]*

### ***Benediction***

Grant, Holy One,  
That thinking, we may think your thoughts;  
That speaking, we may speak your word;  
That singing, we may sing your praise;  
That hearing, we may hear your truth;  
And that willing, we may make your will our own,  
So that going at the end of our worship,  
We may walk in your love and your peace,  
And departing not from on another,  
Not depart from you. Amen.

*[Adapted from "Hear Our Prayer" by Roy Pearson. McGraw-Hill 1961]*

## SCRIPTURE

Throughout the Old and New Testament, passages dealing with health, healing, and caring for God's people are abundant. The Old Testament sheds light on God's ability to heal, as well as God's displeasure for those who ignore the sick. The New Testament has countless examples of Jesus healing the blind, the sick, and the diseased. The following Bible passages are useful as readings during a service or as starting points for a health focused sermon.

### **2 Corinthians 1:3-5**

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ.*

### **Acts 10:34-38**

*Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.*

### **Matthew 10:1**

*Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.*

### **1 Corinthians 12:4-11**

*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.*

### **Additional Resources for Worship**

- Deuteronomy 32:39
- 2 Kings 20:5, 8
- Psalms 6, 30, 41, 107
- Hosea 6:1-3
- Jeremiah 17:14; 33:6
- Isaiah 57:18-19
- Matthew 9:9-13, 34-36
- 1 Corinthians 12:27-3

## HEALTH CARE LITANIES

### Litany #1

Leader: God, You are the source of all healing. You are at work in the curing, caring and medical research we do. You bring healing and hope through the doctors, nurses, and other staff who are part of the American health system.

***People: You have set a health table of plenty.***

Leader: Yet our system itself needs healing. Many of us cannot get the care we need. Even with insurance, many can't get to the table, and fifty million in America are uninsured. When we're sick, we get sicker. We're dying when we could be helped. Help us to act now to treat this ailing system, before even more lose their health.

***People: All families must be able to get to the table.***

Leader: God, you have taught us the duty of caring for the sick, as we do your work in the world. This is our message to all Americans and to our leaders in Washington, D.C. It is a word of justice that echoes through the years from the prophets. As children of a healing God, we are the hands and hearts that can bring healing and wholeness to this failing system and to all our sisters and brothers.

***People: We welcome all people to the table.***

Leader: God, help us to take advantage of the moment before us. We can ensure that all families have access to quality health care coverage that is truly affordable and sustainable. With your guidance, together with hundreds of congregations, thousands of families, and millions of people, we can heal our failing system.

***People: We desire that the table serve all.***

Leader: God, help us to commit to this worthy goal. We will treat this sick system by organizing our efforts and bringing our vision to policy makers. We will bring the stories and suffering of the families in our communities to the attention of our leaders. Through the highest healing power we will ensure health and wholeness in our nation.

***People: Help us to be part of the cure. AMEN.***

*[Adapted from the PICO National Network]*

### Litany #2

Leader: Loving God, we know you care for all your people.

People: **Thank you for your love.**

Leader: Listening God, we know you hear our concerns for those who need help.

People: **Thank you for listening.**

Leader: Today we pray for the people who do not have health insurance, the people who are under insured in our state, and the unknown number of people in Illinois who are threatened by the loss of their health insurance.

People: **Hear our prayer.**

Leader: Empowering God, we know you empower us to be your voice and vision for the health of all your people.

People: **Grant us that power to love and care for our sisters and brothers – all your children – by working for health care justice.**

Leader and People: **Amen.**

*[Adapted from the Health Care Justice Faith Caucus' Health Care Sabbath Congregational Advocacy Toolkit]*

**HYMNS** [Remember to secure copyright permission before reprinting hymns in bulletins.]

- Christ, the Healer, We Have Come (Words Fred Pratt Green; Tune: Distress by W. Walker, Southern Harmony) Lutheran Book of Worship: Hymn 360
- God, Whose Will Is Life and Good (Words: Hardwicke D. Rawnsley; Tune: Leland B. Sateren) Lutheran Book of Worship: Hymn 435
- Your Hand, O Lord, in Days of Old: (Words: Edward H. Plumptre; Tune: Marot) Lutheran Book of Worship: Hymn 431
- Healer of Boundless Compassion: (Russell Schulz-Widmar) Evangelical Lutheran Worship
- May the God of All Healing: (Jayne Southwick Cool) Evangelical Lutheran Worship
- Healer of Our Every Ill: (Words: Marty Haugen; Tune: Marty Haugen) Evangelical Lutheran Worship
- For a World (Words: Miriam Therese Winter, 1987; Tune: Azmon by Carl Gotthelf Gläser, 1828; arr. Lowell Mason, 1839) Words © 1990 Medical Mission Sister
- Restless Weaver (Words: O.I. Cricket Harrison, 1988, rev. 1993; Tune :Beach Spring) Words © 1995 Chalice Press
- Strong, Gentle Children (Words and music Dan Damon, 1991) © 1993 Hope Publishing Co.
- We Cannot Own the Sunlit Sky (Words: Ruth Duck, 1984, 1989; Tune: How Can I Keep from Singing, Robert Lowry, 1869, alt.) Words © 1992 GIA Publications, Inc.

## SERMON

### *Is There No Balm in Gilead?*

By: Shannon Daley-Harris, M.Div.

(Available at <http://www.sermoncentral.com>)

### Jeremiah 8:18-8:22

#### Scripture

My joy is gone; grief is upon me, my heart is sick. Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land: “Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?” (“Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?”) “The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.” For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored? (Jeremiah 8:18-22, NRSV)

#### A Closer Look at the Passage in Context: Jeremiah 8:4-9:1

For many of us, the hymn “There Is a Balm in Gilead” is so familiar, we feel as if we already know this passage, as if we already know its message. It is, however, a powerful passage that deserves a closer look.

Jeremiah 8:4ff resounds with words of judgment and lament that so characterize this book of the Bible. Again and again Jeremiah addresses the people’s waywardness, their straying from right paths, using rhetorical questions to highlight the senselessness of it. One who falls gets up, right? One who strays turns back, right? So why not this people?! Animals show better sense than the people who have gone astray. The focus of 8:4-7 is on the people’s refusal to repent, to turn in a new direction.

Verses nine through 13 turn the critique to the “wise,” religious leaders—scribes, prophets and priests—whose teaching and “wisdom” conflict with the word of the Lord revealed to the prophet. The written word the religious leaders keep is not lived out in the actions God desires. The suffering that results from this judgment will affect not only the religious leaders but their families and communities. In fact, it is not only the wise who are indicted here, but the whole community, “because from the least to the greatest everyone is greedy for unjust gain; from the prophet to priest everyone deals falsely. They have treated the wound of my people carelessly; saying ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.” (Jer. 8:10b-11)

8:14-17 describes the military threat from the North and with great irony describes the people deciding to flee to the city for shelter, only to find judgment and danger there.

Finally, to our central focus: 8:18-9:1, which begins with tears and sorrow. Patrick D. Miller, Charles T. Haley Professor of Old Testament Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, and others suggest that the one weeping may be God, not only the prophet as many have imagined. In verse 19b and again in verse 22, the prophet asks three rhetorical questions, the third of which is accusatory. “Is there no balm in Gilead?” Of course there is. “The balm was a resin from the *Styrax* tree produced especially in the Transjordan region and widely used for

medicinal purposes.” (Oxford Annotated Bible) It was as plentiful as ever. “Is there no physician there?” Again, the rhetorical question assumes the answer is, “yes, there is a physician there.” Then, the next question accuses, “Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?” The problem is not the absence of resources for healing. The problem is the sin and injustice of the people that have resulted in such judgment and suffering. And so our passage ends with the prophet and God weeping “day and night for the slain of my people!”

### **Theological Themes**

Patrick Miller notes the movement from sin to judgment to lament in this and other passages in Jeremiah. “The logic is that in this movement a sinful people evoke God’s judgment and end up in grievous lamentation, a lament that is shared by the prophet and by God.” (p. 642, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*).

This passage also emphasizes another theme in Jeremiah: turn and return. The Hebrew word *shub* is used both in describing the people’s turning away from the right path and their repenting, turning back to God. The active nature of “turn away” and “turn back” helps recast sin and repentance from passive states of one’s heart, as they are sometimes seen, to acts and choices that we make. The indwelling of God places conditions on the heart of the believer that must be lived out in their actions.

Too, no single class or sort of person has a corner on sin in this passage. The people of Judah are held accountable, the religious leaders are held accountable, the community as a whole from the least to the greatest is said to experience sin. There can be no finger pointing among those who sin; all are judged... and all are invited to return to God.

### **Pastoral Implications**

There are those who do not have health care coverage in virtually every congregation. Surely they identify with the cry, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?” Too often this identification, however, is made in silence. Many people experience shame about being uninsured and feel a sense of failure. Pastors, congregation members and friends may be unaware of those who experience the stress and physical repercussions of lack of insurance.

Even those who have health insurance may be in the midst of a health crisis of their own or that of a loved one. Surely the cry and question is upon their heart, “Why then has [my] health...not been restored?” To be sure, one needs to recognize that health care coverage is not a guarantee against sickness and injury, and insured people may experience their own struggles and grief over poor health.

Still others may come to this text with the familiar words of the hymn in their head, “There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole, there is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.” In discussing health in a religious context, one always needs to be mindful of the connection many still make between sickness and sin; surely, if I (or she) had not done something wrong, had not been sinful, I (or she) would not be “punished” like this. Pastoral sensitivity is called for to ensure that the sick, or the uninsured, do not blame themselves, and

that others do not blame them and assign a moral judgment to the one who is suffering.

### **Preaching the Lesson**

“Sin-sick soul” is not a medical condition, it is a spiritual condition. And it is not only an individual complaint but the status of society.

While we might like to keep the notion of sin vague and at arm’s length, we are confronted by concrete examples close to home:

- How would God judge our nation’s sin in allowing 8.7 million children—the same number as every first- and second-grader in our country’s public schools—to lack health insurance and suffer the consequences?
- How would God judge the sin of our nation allowing nearly 50 million people to lack health insurance, and live sicker and die younger as a result?
- Can it be other than sin to live in a nation blessed with unparalleled health technologies, trained health care providers, state-of-the-art health care facilities, and allow one in six persons to lack health insurance and the access to the care that he or she needs?
- How would our silence and inaction on solving the problem of the uninsured be judged, when we know that people who are uninsured live sicker and often die younger as a result?

Surely, this fails to meet God’s standard of justice and God’s expectations of community and compassion.

Our scripture gives voice to the anguish that the prophet and God feel at the sin of the people, at the unrelieved suffering, at the failure of justice and compassion.

The prophet asks rhetorically, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?” The answer, of course, is that there is. There is balm, as always. There are physicians as before. “Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?” The difficult truth is that their health has not been restored because of the nation’s injustice and lack of compassion, because of their stubborn refusal to live as God’s beloved community.

When those who are uninsured live sicker and die younger, surely we too cry, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people been restored?”

When uninsured women with breast cancer are twice as likely to die of it than insured women, surely we cry “Is there no balm in Gilead...”

When uninsured men are nearly twice as likely to be diagnosed at a late stage of colon cancer as men with insurance, will we ask, “Is there no balm in Gilead?”

When children without health insurance are seven times more likely to go without needed medical care than children who have health insurance, shall we not demand to know, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people

not been restored?”

Would this cry be on the lips of Rosemary? Rosemary was laid off from her job in September and cannot afford her COBRA premiums, which would have allowed her to pay to continue the coverage previously provided by her employer. As a survivor of breast and cervical cancer, premiums for individual private insurance are sky-high. Although at risk for a recurrence of her cancers, she has been unable to afford even a basic check-up with the doctors that she saw for her original treatment. Instead, she lives in fear for her health.

Would Tabitha ask with us, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?” Tabitha, the mother of two small children, is self-employed as a licensed in-home child care provider. Both of Tabitha’s children are covered by Medicaid. However, with a monthly income of \$1,600, Tabitha earns too much to qualify for Medicaid herself and too little to pay for private insurance.

Should we not ask, “Why has the health of my poor people not been restored?” when we hear the experience of Robert? Robert, the father of two young children, is a self-employed seasonal general contractor who for a long time was unable to afford the costs of private health insurance for himself, his wife and their children. Although he recently managed to pay for coverage for his children and wife, he is only able to afford catastrophic coverage for himself. Because of his limited coverage, he has not sought care for a chronic condition that would improve with treatment.

We need not remain stuck in “lament.” Today, as in Jeremiah’s day, God invites us to turn away from the wrong path and to return to God, to fulfill God’s standard of justice and compassion. Cover the Uninsured Week states the choice before us simply: We can let millions of Americans live without health care coverage, or we can do something about it.”

### **Prayer**

O God, our Comforter in sorrow, our hearts ache this day for the millions of people who suffer illness and injury, for those who lack health insurance and cannot get the care they need, for those who despair and fear they will not be saved.

You are the Balm of our souls. Restore our hearts and wills to wholeness with your healing balm, we pray, so that we will be prepared to act with justice and love to care for your people. Move our hearts to weep with their pain. Move our hands to reach out with comfort. Move our wills to work so that the resources you have blessed us with are available to all. Amen.



## Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Issue Brief:  
Domestic Healthcare

### ELCA Policy Base

The ELCA social statement on economic life, *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*, calls for “addressing the barriers individuals face in preparing for and sustaining a livelihood (such as lack of ... health care).” It also calls for “public policies that ensure adequate social security, unemployment insurance, and health care coverage.”

Consequently, the ELCA believes that all people should have access to basic, affordable physical and mental health care, including substance abuse treatment and dental care. The ELCA social statement, *Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor*, states: “Our search for justice is a call from God, a concern especially for the ‘rights of the needy’ (Jeremiah 5:28). Because health is central to personal well-being and functioning in society, a just society is one that supports the health of all its members. Thus, our common effort to provide access to health care for all is a matter of social justice for all people.” In response to God’s love, therefore, we as the ELCA work to promote the health and healing of all people, which includes advocating for health care policy that will reduce the number of uninsured people and reduce healthcare costs.

**Background:** According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are currently

nearly **50 million uninsured people** in the United States. From 2005 to 2006, the number of people without health insurance went up from 46.6 to 47 million, and the number of uninsured children increased from 8 to 8.7 million. Not surprisingly, the poor bare the brunt of this crisis, being twice as likely to be uninsured as those above the poverty level.

Most of the uninsured are working. In a recent study, Families USA reports that four out of five individuals (79.3 percent) who went without health insurance during 2006-2007 were from working families. Many people work in jobs without health coverage, including temporary or contract jobs. Those without employer coverage often find it difficult to secure private coverage. One recent study by the Commonwealth Fund found that nine out of ten people who sought individual coverage never purchased a plan, either because they couldn’t find an affordable plan, they were rejected for coverage, or they were offered a plan that excluded coverage for the very care they were most likely to need. Skyrocketing insurance premiums also pose formidable problems. Families USA notes that between 2000 and 2006, premiums for job-based health insurance increased by 73.8 percent, while median worker earnings rose by only 11.6 percent. Consequently, employers face tough decisions.

Some employers have decided to offer “thinner coverage” or drop coverage altogether, while others require employees to pay a greater share of the premiums. According to research by Harvard Medical and Law Schools, illness and medical bills are big reasons behind fully half of all personal bankruptcies.

Not surprisingly, there are numerous unfavorable consequences for those without health insurance. The Kaiser Family Foundation reports that regardless of health condition, uninsured individuals are three times more likely than those with insurance to report problems obtaining needed medical care. Further, those without coverage are unlikely to receive timely

preventative care, and cost of care often makes it difficult to follow recommended treatment. Most extremely, Institute of Medicine estimates show that the number of excess deaths among uninsured adults between ages 25 and 64 is in the range of 18,000 a year. The government safety net for the uninsured primarily consists of Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), which provide health coverage to more than 60 million low-income people, primarily children and families. Although these programs are vitally important and effective, they do not reach all low-income and vulnerable Americans.

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## Washington Office

### Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

## What Now?

### 3 Things You Can Do To Be Part of the Health Care Debate

#### 1. Contemplate!

- Pray for those affected by poor health, inadequate access to health care, and lack of health care coverage.
- Journal about your own health story, including your experience with the health care system. What worked well? What did not? What would you change, and what would you keep the same?

#### 2. Educate!

- Read and consider the ELCA Social Statement on health and health care, “Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor.”
- Check out the resources available in this toolkit and discuss the things you learn with family and friends.

#### 3. Advocate!

- Go to [www.elca.org/advocacy](http://www.elca.org/advocacy) and join the ELCA's e-advocacy network to receive updates from the ELCA Washington Office about health care reform.
- Send a letter or email to your Senators and Representative. Tell them your own story and urge them to pass comprehensive health care reform this year.
- Set up in-district visits with your senator and representative. The week of June 29<sup>th</sup>, members of Congress will return to their districts for the July 4<sup>th</sup> recess. This is the perfect opportunity to schedule a visit and let them know how important health care reform is to the community of faith and members of their states and districts.

**For tools and tips about how to do advocacy, visit**

**<http://www.elca.org/Our-Faith-In-Action/Justice/Advocacy/Get-Involved/Tools.aspx>**

## **Our Health Care at a Glance:** *What does a failing system look like?*

### **MORAL CRISIS**

- 18,000 Americans die prematurely as a result of their lack of health insurance.
- 47 million Americans are currently uninsured.
- Disparities in care based on race, income, gender or geography mean many people receive low quality care or do not have access to necessary medical treatments.
- For-profit systems can value the bottom line at the expense of people's health care needs.
- Non-comprehensive insurance plans lead to more Americans lacking health security.

### **MEDICAL CRISIS**

- The uninsured wait longer to seek care and forgo needed preventive care, often resulting in long-term medical consequences.
- Shifting nature of current system keeps many consumers from establishing a stable, long-term relationship with a health care provider.
- Many insurance plans don't offer comprehensive care and do not cover preventive care.
- Providers are forced to make decisions about treatment based on the patient's level of insurance and reimbursement rates.
- Providers are encouraged to treat episodes of illness as isolated incidents rather than providing long-term care and preventive services.

### **ECONOMIC CRISIS**

#### **Families:**

- **50%** of all personal bankruptcies are caused by medical debt.
- Out-of-pocket costs for things like prescription drugs and dental care leave even insured families making painful decisions about what kind of treatment they can afford.
- Many workers stay in less-than-ideal jobs to avoid losing health coverage during a period of unemployment or self-employment.
- Between 2000 and 2006, premiums for job-based health insurance increased by 73.8 percent, while median worker earnings rose by only 11.6 percent.
- Increasing costs incurred by uninsured individuals who can't pay drive up all premiums.

#### **Businesses:**

- Rising health care costs eat into wage gains and profits.
- The high cost of health care leads some businesses to hire part-time workers to avoid paying for their coverage.
- Responsible small businesses are being forced to drop coverage, or shift a larger share of premiums to workers, in order to stay in business.

#### **Government:**

- Even though government provides tax incentives to both large and small employers, they still provide care for the sickest and the poorest who have been denied elsewhere.
- Health care costs are pitted against other public programs for a shrinking pot of funds under the current budget.