

As a member of the PICO National Network, which co-sponsored this “health care blitz,” Peninsula Interfaith Action collaborated in organizing the August 19 conference call with President Obama. Over 300 Peninsula residents joined the call as a result of their connection with PIA and more than 140,000 people participated in this call nationwide.

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Health Care as a ‘Moral Imperative’

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A group of religious leaders launches a health care blitz Wednesday that will be highlighted by television ads, sermons and a nationwide “call-in” to the White House that will stress the “moral imperative” to extend affordable coverage to the nation’s uninsured.

The “40 Days for Health Reform” initiative by the interfaith groups will include prayer services in congressional districts, meetings of religious leaders with members of Congress and a “Nationwide Health Care Sermon Weekend” with preaching from the pulpit on the need for a health care overhaul. The leaders say they’re the ones who see up close the problems with the insurance system and the need for change.

The event is being sponsored by denominations and groups such as the National Baptist Convention USA, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, United Methodist Church General Board of Church & Society, Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, the Episcopal Church, Unitarian Universalist Association, African Methodist Episcopal Church, United Church of Christ and Islamic Society of North America.

Jim Wallis, an evangelical and president of the Christian social action group Sojourners, said Aug. 11 that the intent is not to “get into the weeds” on the specifics of what should be included in health legislation pending in Congress or take positions on highly controversial issues such as the public option, employer mandates or abortion coverage.

But he said religious leaders do want to counter those who have “demagogued” the issue at town hall meetings over the past few weeks — thus thrusting the faith community into an ongoing battle between Democrats and Republicans over health care, marked by town hall meetings involving shouting, fights and even arrests.

“There are people in the country who want to stop an honest, fair, civil and moral conversation about health care. They’re organized and they really want to shut down democracy and we can’t let that happen,” said Wallis. “The faith community is literally going to stand in the way of those who want to stop a conversation.”

He and others said inviting President Obama to take part in a conference call on health without an accompanying Republican viewpoint does not make it into a partisan event. Obama is not expected to discuss the details of his proposal but rather the moral perspective of extending coverage to the 47 million uninsured, they said.

“It wasn’t the president who turned this into a partisan issue, it happened to be the way it played out,” said David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. “I truly think he believed this would stand above partisan politics. ... the president set out a moral vision that resonates deeply with the consensus views of large segments of the religious community, even some who may disagree with particular legislation Congress is doing.”

The idea is also to encourage conversation within congregations. Adam Hamilton, senior pastor of the 13,000-member Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kan., said his congregation is probably 60 percent Republican and he considers himself a centrist. “Part of the need.... is to allow folks from varying sides to have a chance to speak about this issue and to do so in a way that allows people to hear the issues and not just the rhetoric,” he said.

Saperstein said the people falling through the cracks “are as likely to be a Republican as they are a Democrat.”

Other groups organizing the health overhaul push are the PICO National Network, which engages in faith-based community organizing; Faith in the Public Life, a nonprofit group; Faithful America, an online organizing group; and Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good.

The group also is sponsoring a 30-second TV ad that criticizes unnamed “special interests in Washington” seeking to block health overhaul. “Killing reform will boost their profits,” says Rev. Stevie Wakes of Olivet Institutional Baptist Church in Kansas City, Kan., in the ad. The ad will run on national cable networks and District of Columbia cable while fundraising continues to try to run it elsewhere.

Prayer services and advocacy will be targeted to specific congressional districts, said Gordon Whitman of PICO. “It’s really an overlay of Blue Dogs and moderate Democrats and moderate Republicans and areas where religion is especially significant to public life,” he said, to convey the message that there is a middle ground in the health overhaul debate.

John Hay Jr., an evangelical leader from Indianapolis, Ind., said the “40 Days for Health Reform” effort is “really an effort to refocus where the central moral issue is — it seems to have been derailed or taken off track by a lot of voices over the past couple of weeks.”