

Health Care and Social Justice

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I believe the Bible. I believe the whole Bible. I regard it as the inspired word of God and I take it to be the standard of how human beings ought to live. Perhaps I am stating the obvious, but I wanted to start with this basic affirmation because what I want to say as my main contribution to this conference rests on Scripture. Too often people use the Bible today in inappropriate ways, and too often Christians fail to connect their witness to God's revelation. Our witness for social justice is deeply rooted in the biblical understanding of God and God's plan for creation.

First, God is love. 1 John 4:7 makes that clear "God is love." It then draws the inescapable conclusion: "Whoever does not love does not know God." Christ himself listed the two greatest commandments in the Old Testament. He cited Deuteronomy 6:4 "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." But he continued by quoting Leviticus 19:18: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." When asked once who is my neighbor, he picked the most despised person—a Samaritan—and told a parable of how he cared for a Jew who had been victimized by robbers and ignored by the religious folk of his own day.

Second, God is the creator of all human beings, and men and women are created in God's image. That is the deep, theological view that underlies our convictions about human dignity. All human beings are valuable. All human beings deserve the best we can give them. Men and women of all colors, all nationalities, all ethnic groups, all levels of education and all levels of material wealth are precious in God's sight. I believe this Christian doctrine underlies the powerful lines of the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men [persons] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Third, God hates sin. God gets angry when we human beings violate his commandments. Among other things, God has commanded that we care for the poor and make sure that they have the necessities of life. Isaiah (not to mention most of the other Old Testament prophets) was quite clear. God did not like our religious festivals. He said “they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them.” He continues in the first chapter of his book, “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” Psalm 146 makes it clear as well. It says God is the one “who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.” Micah summarized it brilliantly: “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?” Jesus was not only the incarnate Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, he was a prophet who reiterated the words of the Old Testament. In his parable of the sheep and the goats, it is not the mouth Christians who get into heaven. (You know who the mouth Christians are—the ones who talk a lot, who are constantly saying “Lord, Lord” but they don’t actually do the will of God. They talk the talk without walking the walk.) In that parable he says in Matthew 25:34-40: “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you? And the king will answer them, ‘Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’” The parable continues with those who did not

feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick or visit those in prison being sent to eternal punishment.

This is a speech about health care and social justice. But I think it is absolutely crucial that we Christians always ground our witness for justice in the biblical record. That is especially true in the present political climate. There is a lot of talk by Christians today about biblical morality. I am pleased that the Scriptures are being taken serious in public debates about moral issues. I am not, pleased however, with the narrow range of social issues that is garnering the vast majority of media attention. Yes, issues of sexuality and the end of life are important issues and Scripture does have something to say about them. But I am convinced that the Bible gives much more attention to poverty and its related issues than it does to sex. I am convinced that God cares deeply how we treat persons who are in need and that a faithful, holistic reading of the Bible will lead us to give a much higher degree of attention to issues of poverty than they have been getting in recent political debates.

But there is another component to the current political climate in the United States. Dr. Bill Roy recently published an opinion piece in the Topeka Capitol Journal arguing that government helped make the Greatest Generation truly great. In it he quoted Paul Krugman who said “we no longer look at the less fortunate and think, ‘There but for the grace of God go I,’ but rather ‘Why should I be taxed to support those people?’”

A number of people are going around the state of Kansas in a bus tour promoting something they call the Taxpayers Bill of Rights. This is a great deception because it takes something we all care about, quality of life, and uses it to promote something that will take away from the quality of life in Kansas. We believe that the decisions about spending money for public education, highways, health care, and social services for the poor should be made by our elected representatives with input from the people who have expertise in these areas. We are opposed to TABOR.

I have a partial explanation for this phenomenon. I have been convinced by Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone* that many problems in America can be traced to a lack of community. Since 1964 every form of community—what Putnam calls “social capital” has declined. Churches, political parties, social clubs like PEO, service clubs like Rotary and Kiwanis, people eating dinner in other people's homes, even bowling leagues (hence the title) have become less significant as part of people's lives. People are more and more isolated from their neighbors and families. Putnam lists a number of causes, with television and air conditioning leading the list.

But another consequence of this isolation is that the poor are no longer the neighbors, co-workers or employees or friends of middle-class persons. Instead they have become “those people” about whom I don't care.

But there is also a moral problem here. People who name Christ as Lord and Savior, people who belong to churches and who worship every Sunday seem uninterested in the neediest in our communities. I am probably preaching to the choir here—you all are taking time out of a Tuesday to think and dialogue about this issue and I am grateful for you. Further, when there is a catastrophe like the tsunami or a hurricane like Katrina, Christians do respond. But there are everyday problems like access to health care, like hunger, like the funding of public education, like finding meaningful employment with benefits—these problems need the same sort of attention that natural disasters receive.

As the Bishop of the United Methodist Church in Kansas, I see as a part of my ministry to be aware of critical issues facing the citizens of Kansas. It is my intention to do what I can to focus attention on poverty and its related issues. One of the most serious of those related issues is access to health care.

Many surveys indicate that 275,000 – 300,000 Kansans live each day without health insurance. An unknown number are under-insured or have restrictive health insurance policies. We don't know the number of persons who self-limit their medications because they cannot afford the full prescription. We continue to have young children not fully

immunized and adults not availing themselves of such simple items as flu shots. Our legislature indicates that the cost of health care to the state is a train wreck waiting to happen. I think all of the citizens of Kansas have a stake in what is happening to ourselves and others. We Christians, because we love God with all of our hearts, minds, souls and strength and we love our neighbors as ourselves, we have a special interest in addressing issues of health care for all of our neighbors throughout the state. The Bible texts I have been citing put us on solid ground as we think of ways to be responsible Christians and good citizens.

There are times we may forget our own rich history through the life and ministry of John Wesley. He was an evangelist who called sinners to repentance and brought the unchurched into the Christian life. He understood salvation as a process, so that those who accepted Jesus as Savior also accepted him as their Lord. This led to growth toward Christian maturity or perfection. It meant pursuing holiness, both individual and social holiness. "Directly opposite to this is the gospel of Christ. Solitary religion is not to be found there. "Holy solitaries" is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness. "Faith working by love" is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection. "This commandment have we from Christ, that he who loves God, love his brother also;" and that we manifest our love "by doing good unto all men; especially to them that are of the household of faith." And in truth, whosoever loveth his brethren, not in word only, but as Christ loved him, cannot but be "zealous of good works."¹

In my book *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center*, I have tried to explain why United Methodism differs from some other Christians in this regard. I wrote, "In many parts of Protestant Christianity forms of privatized Christianity that focus on the salvation of the individual to the neglect of social justice have existed. In other places ministries of social justice have become the primary form of Christian witness to the

¹ "Preface to Hymns and Sacred Poems," (1739) *Works of John Wesley*, (Jackson edition) 14:321-22

exclusion of evangelistic efforts aimed at individuals. Our United Methodist doctrine holds both of these concerns simultaneously and views them as interdependent.

Our struggles for human dignity and social reform have been a response to God's demand for love, mercy, and justice in the light of the Kingdom. We proclaim no personal gospel that fails to express itself in relevant social concerns; we proclaim no social gospel that does not include the personal transformation of sinners.

It is our conviction that the good news of the Kingdom must judge, redeem, and reform the sinful social structures of our time.

The Book of Discipline and the General Rules convey the expectation of discipline within the experience of individuals and the life of the Church. Such discipline assumes accountability to the community of faith by those who claim that community's support.²

Given this background, you will understand why I am passionately concerned about the issue of health care in the/our state. I am grateful that each of you has given time to attend this conference. I want to review what are some of the basic health concerns of our state.

The *Kansas Kids Count Data Book* provides troubling information. It pointed out that in 2003, 1,214 babies were born in Kansas to school-aged mothers 10-17 years of age. We should be concerned about both the future of those babies and the young mothers.

The same document reports that 135,594 school-age children are receiving free or reduced cost school lunches. That represents nearly 30% of the school-age children in Kansas. That is a matter about which we should have concern. All children of Kansas must receive adequate nourishment if we expect them to function well in school and in society.

Kids Count points out that 20% of the mothers giving birth in Kansas do not receive prenatal care. Without prenatal care, it is nearly predictable as to the possible birth complications and early life problems with the baby. Additionally, the mother has not

²*The United Methodist Book of Discipline (2000)*, 49.

had the opportunity for professional health care counseling during an important time of her life.

All of us should be concerned about the 11,291 youth who smoke in Kansas as reported by *Kids Count*. We know of the many negatives related to smoking and we should be assisting the youth and helping in providing other options for showing maturity and coming of age.

On a larger scale, let's turn our attention to the 275,000 – 300,000 persons in Kansas who are without health insurance. Where are they going to turn for help? We may say, "They will get medical assistance if they need it by going to hospital emergency rooms." Such an alternative means that the cost of that care is non-reimbursed and the burden is assumed by the hospital. More importantly, it prevents that individual or family from being under the care of a family physician. The family physician would be in a position to provide guidance and direction in the assuring of ongoing, preventative healthcare.

Healthcare for over 330,000 persons in Kansas comes through medical assistance as provided by the state of Kansas. Currently there is a special interim legislative committee which is looking at cost containment measures for the medical assistance program. The legislators representing us are looking for ways to provide medical services without a tax increase. One methodology may be that of cutting or limiting optional services. An optional service is home and community based services. This is a program which makes it possible for many frail elderly persons and persons with disabilities to remain in their own home and communities. Without this program many of those persons would be forced from their homes and communities and into some type of institutional care. We need to be concerned about these folks who are our neighbors.

As United Methodists we are challenged to view the issues of healthcare and social justice in a thoughtful and action-oriented way.

Carefully ponder our Social Principle related to health care.

Health is a condition of physical, mental, social, and spiritual well-being, and we view it as a responsibility—public and private. Health care is a basic human right. . . . It is unjust to construct or perpetuate barriers to physical or mental wholeness or full participation in community. We encourage individuals to pursue a healthy lifestyle and affirm the importance of preventive health care, health education, environmental and occupational safety, good nutrition, and secure affordable housing in achieving health. We also recognize the role of governments in ensuring that each individual has access to those elements necessary to good health. ³

This gives us clear guidance as to how we need to proceed. We cannot afford to be passive.

The Social Principle on the Right to Health Care is made practical by a Resolution No. 109, “Health and Wholeness” passed by the 2000 General Conference.

Within a just society, every person has a right to:

1. basic health services that are accessible and affordable in each geographic and cultural setting;
2. an environment that promotes health;
3. active involvement in the formulation of health-care activities that meet local needs and priorities;
4. information about his or her illness, and to be an active participant in treatment and rehabilitation;
5. receive compassionate and skilled care;
6. a health-care system sensitive to cultural needs and medical/ ethical critique; and
7. access to funding sources where necessary for basic health services.

Health Insurance

For all persons to have adequate access to needed health-care services, public financing must be a significant part of an overall health insurance plan. Public funding is necessary to pay for insuring those who cannot pay part or all of the necessary premiums required.

Health Maintenance

³ Social Principles, ¶162T.

Many health problems and illnesses are preventable if we accept the fact that health maintenance requires understanding of the unity of the human body, mind, and spirit. The whole person needs proper nutrition, exercise, the challenge to learn and grow, and an acknowledgement that this is a lifelong process. We recognize that these needs are difficult to meet when environmental factors contribute to ill health. But we must acknowledge the fact that we have separated spiritual health from physical health. In Western Protestant interpretation of health and healing, the union of the body and spirit is often dismissed. Cultures that respect and revere that union are often disregarded or looked upon in a condescending manner. The early church did not make these distinctions, nor did Jesus in his healing ministry. We must, if we are to obtain good health, unite the body and spirit in our thinking and actions.

Therefore, as Christians we accept responsibility for modeling this holistic, preventive style of health maintenance. We commit ourselves to examining the value systems at work in our society as they impact the health of people and to working for programs and policies that enable people to breathe clean air, drink clean water, eat wholesome food, and have access to adequate education and freedom that enable mind and spirit to develop.

Some specific points are made in the section of the resolution on Medical Services:

We support the following principles of access to health services:

1. In a just society, all people are entitled to basic maintenance and health-care services. We reject as contrary to our understanding of the gospel the notion of differing standards of health care for various segments of the population.
2. Health care should be comprehensive, including preventive, therapeutic, and rehabilitative services.
3. Religious and other appropriate forms of counseling should be available to all patients and families when they are called upon to make difficult medical choices, so that responsible decisions, within the context of the Christian faith, may be made concerning organ transplants, use of extreme measures to prolong life, abortion, sterilization, genetic counseling, institutionalization, and death with dignity.

4. We encourage development of community support systems that permit alternatives to institutional care for such groups as the aging, the terminally ill and mentally ill, and other persons with special needs.
5. Professional health-care personnel should be recruited and appropriately educated to meet the health-care needs of all persons. Especially urgent is the need for physicians trained in geriatric medicine. Special priorities should be established to secure among the professional group at least proportional representation of women and minorities who are now seriously under-represented.
6. In areas where medical services are not available or are under-supplied, we urge private or public funding to provide the full range of needed services. To meet these goals, we recommend the reallocation of funds from armaments to human services, both nationally and internationally (Social Principles, ¶ 165C).
7. Regional planning processes should coordinate the services rendered by all health-care institutions, including those funded by governments, to create a more effective system of health services in every area. Priorities should be established for the provision of health services, such as preventive care, mental-health services, home care, and health education.
8. Corrective measures should be taken where there is maldistribution or unavailability of hospital beds, intermediate care and nursing home care, home-delivered care, neighborhood health centers, community mental-health centers, and emergency care networks.
9. We encourage medical education for laypersons that will enable them to effectively evaluate medical care they need and are receiving.
10. We support the medical community in its effort to uphold ethical standards and to promote quality assurance.
11. We support and encourage medical volunteers.

The point of this conference is to learn and to act. Through the activities of this day, I hope you will leave with new Kansas health information, having been reminded of the strong United Methodist heritage in the area of concern for our neighbor, having old ideas challenged by new ideas and you leave prepared to act.

I want to be clear that the United Methodist Church does not endorse, nor have I endorsed, a specific program of health care. I personally believe in the free market economic system with appropriate safeguards to take care of the least of these in our society. I am not taking sides on behalf of one political party or another. That is not appropriate for a religious leader.

What I have done, and what I hope to encourage, is a vigorous debate among citizens, religious leaders and political leaders of our state about how best to meet our moral obligations to the least of these in Kansas. Christians need to voice their views that our local, state and Federal governments should meet the highest standards of care for all citizens. How this is best done is something on which reasonable and faithful Christians can and will disagree. But I trust we are all united in trying to provide the best possible care for all our brothers and sisters.

Let me be specific.

1. Read, study, pray about the many biblical passages which challenge us to be concerned about our neighbor.
2. Take one idea out of each presentation given today and make it your own and act upon it.
3. Read about the health care issues and express your concern to our elected officials.
4. Commit to good health habits in your own life. Be a good steward of your body.
5. Send me an email and tell me what you would like for your Bishop to say in the public arena related to health care.
6. Put up on your refrigerator these words from Romans 12:1-8.

We have had some excellent presentations already today, and there are more workshops to come.

May we all be a part of what God is blessing for all of His children.

