

Black Pentecostal church backs health-care reform, including public option: Church of God in Christ

by [John Dart](#) in the [November 3, 2009](#) issue

The presiding bishop of the historically black Church of God in Christ, one of the largest Pentecostal denominations in the U.S., has announced that its leadership supports the White House healthcare reform proposals, including an optional government-run plan.

In a little-noted statement, Presiding Bishop Charles E. Blake Sr. of Los Angeles, speaking for the Memphis-based COGIC, called upon the broader faith community “to set a moral example which moves our country beyond the noise of racial division and partisanship by supporting President Obama’s courageous initiative.”

The church—said to have 6 million members globally, including an estimated 5 million Americans—was speaking “on behalf of millions who cannot obtain or afford adequate health insurance,” Blake said. “We also strongly believe that a public nonprofit option is essential to this end.”

Though COGIC members oppose abortion, Blake said his church accepts assurances by the president that “costs related to the abortion of fetuses” will not be paid by taxpayer money. Republican lawmakers and conservative critics of bills before the Congress have disagreed with Democrats on that point.

Blake’s statement was posted on COGIC’s Web site shortly after its bishops conference convened in September. A well-known pastor in Los Angeles, whose church has 24,000 members, Blake won election to the COGIC’s top post in 2007, following the March 2007 death of Presiding Bishop Gilbert E. Patterson, and again for a full term in 2008.

Tying the church’s stance to Christian teaching to aid the poor, Blake said: “We endorse the requirement that all individuals carry basic health insurance, provided

that the government recognizes hardship waivers where necessary and provides sliding-scale tax credits for the needy.”

Two large coalitions of religious groups have staked out opposing positions on health-care reform, according to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. The Faith for Health campaign unites self-described progressive groups in a multifaith effort to support Obama’s proposals. Three black denominations are members of the coalition: the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, the National Baptist Convention, USA, and the Progressive National Baptist Convention.

Opposing that coalition is the Freedom Federation, which includes two dozen conservative Christian activist organizations among its backers.

The Church of God in Christ was the only denomination listed as a member of the Freedom Federation, which formed on June 30. However, COGIC was not among the signers in early September when the federation issued a statement rejecting legislation that would include abortion coverage or a public option.

The pro-White House statement from Blake and other COGIC leaders drew an angry response on September 28 from a group of pro-life black pastors saying they were “outraged” by COGIC’s support for the health-reform plans, according to an online story by *Charisma* magazine.

“We recommend in the strongest terms possible that this endorsement be withdrawn until such time that the Obama administration adds language to the health-care proposal that specifically prohibits taxpayer-funded abortions,” the group said.

Black ministers who signed the protest statement included Walter B. Hoyer of the Issues4Life Foundation, Levon Yuille of the National Black Pro-Life Congress, LEARN Inc. founder Johnny Hunter and pastor Stephen E. Broden of Fair Park Bible Fellowship in Dallas.