

Churches weigh in on health-care reform: Legislators and their churches differ

by [John Dart](#) in the [April 20, 2010](#) issue

United Methodists serving in the House of Representatives opposed the historic passage of the health-care reform package 26 to 18, with five Democrats joining 21 Republicans in voting no.

Yet, in remarks just before the March 21 vote, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi cited the United Methodist Church as one of the many organizations “sending a clear message to members of Congress” asking them to vote yes.

Pelosi’s Web site also listed groups that backed reform, and it included the UMC’s Board of Church and Society, whose chief executive is James Winkler.

Winkler noted that the United Methodist documents declare health care for all “a basic human right” and believe it “a governmental responsibility,” according to United Methodist News Service. Gregory Palmer, president of the Council of Bishops, said he “rejoiced” at the bill’s passage because it aligns with Methodist values.

The Methodists’ top legislative assembly, which meets at four-year intervals, took no stand on health-care reform at its 2008 General Conference. But delegates did charge the Board of Church and Society with the primary responsibility for advocating for universal health care. The church’s 2008 book of resolutions observed that “fulfillment of this duty is thwarted by simultaneous crises of access, quality and cost.”

The nearly \$1 trillion price tag for the bill drew heated objections from Republicans, who also opposed expanded federal regulation. After the bill was passed by a 219–212 vote, President Obama signed the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act into law on March 23. The GOP has promised to seek repeal of the law and to challenge it in courts.

While the different opinions of United Methodists on the legislation did not become a public issue, disputes among Roman Catholics were highly visible.

The U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops contended that the legislation was flawed because it “expands federal funding and the role of the federal government in the provision of abortion procedures,” in the words of Cardinal Francis George of Chicago.

But a yes vote was sought by Sister Carol Keenan, president and CEO of the Catholic Health Association, which represents about 2,000 Catholic health-care facilities and organizations. She approved the antiabortion language in the Senate version and termed passage of the bill a “moral imperative.”

NETWORK, an umbrella group claiming to represent about 59,000 religious sisters, wrote a more pointed letter to lawmakers agreeing with the Catholic Health Association and calling the bill “life-affirming,” however “imperfect.” A spokeswoman for the bishops said the nuns’ organization “grossly overstated” its following.

Rep. Bart Stupak, an antiabortion Democrat from Michigan, who had concurred with the bishops’ view, was considering a no vote. But he decided to vote yes after Obama promised to sign an executive order barring use of federal funds for abortions.

In the heated House debate on March 22, Rep. Randy Neugebauer (R., Tex.) shouted something about a “baby killer” during Stupak’s speech. Neugebauer later apologized but said he was referring to the bill: “It’s a baby killer.”

Outside the Capitol, nearly 1,000 Tea Party activists rallied against the bill, and some protesters hurled epithets like “nigger” against members of the Black Congressional Caucus and “faggot” at Rep. Barney Frank (D., Mass). Rep. Emanuel Cleaver (D., Mo.), a United Methodist clergyman, was called names and spit at as he walked to the Capitol.

Geoffrey A. Black, general minister and president of the United Church of Christ, said he was not surprised by the angry jeers. “I have long suspected that racism and homophobia are some of the underlying motives” of the angriest protesters, he said, according to a UCC news release.

Black, one of many ecumenical leaders in Washington for an annual advocacy event, was jubilant after the vote. "The passing of this bill moves us closer to the realm of God, a realm where mercy, compassion and love for all reigns on earth."

Michael Kinnamon, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, expressed his gratitude March 22 for the law, which is necessary "to protect the most vulnerable members of society, the uninsured, millions of whom are children."

Regretting that the debate was "so bitterly divisive," Kinnamon pointed to the "bruising debate in Congress" when President Franklin D. Roosevelt proposed Social Security during the Great Depression. Even after its passage, opposing senators filibustered against funding measures for the law. "Today we can't imagine life in this country without Social Security," he said.