

Faith leaders support including contraception in health reform

by [Bob Allen](#)

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WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Religious leaders on both sides of the abortion debate called on Congress to include free birth control as a component in health-care reform.

Responding to an [Institute of Medicine](#) panel considering whether contraception should be classified in health-reform legislation as a preventive service that insurance companies must cover without a co-payment, the religious leaders endorsed the idea as a common-ground approach to reducing abortion.

"Inclusion of contraception in preventive services guidelines will be a critical victory for common ground on abortion, demonstrating that those who disagree on the legality of abortion can agree that we ought to prevent unintended pregnancies," said David Gushee, a Mercer University professor and co-founder of the New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good.

Women's health advocates say requiring insurance companies to cover contraceptives without a co-payment would prevent nearly 2 million pregnancies and 810,000 abortions each year. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops opposes the idea on religious grounds.

Gushee, who writes a regular [column](#) for Associated Baptist Press, said sexual responsibility includes both abstinence and careful use of contraception. Removing financial obstacles to obtaining birth control, he said, "can enable women and men to exercise greater moral responsibility with their sexuality."

"Contraception is a crucial preventive service that will tackle one of the primary root causes of abortions, a tragic decision that the vast majority of women strongly and rightly wish to avoid," Gushee said. "Covering contraceptive services reflects the realities of our world and will do much to reduce the disastrously high number of abortions in America."

Supporters of the proposal say millions of women who otherwise would purchase contraceptives every month are foregoing the expense due to the economy.

Derrick Harkins, senior pastor of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in Washington, said that despite "significantly differing opinions" about abortion, a "very clear point of common ground" exists on prevention of unintended pregnancies.

"Ensuring that low-income women, along with all other women, have access to affordable contraception is a crucial, common-sense way to prevent unintended pregnancies, which often end in abortion," Harkins said. "I believe that persons on both sides of this difficult issue would agree that including contraception as a preventive service that insurance companies must cover without a co-payment is a viable step in promoting women's health, and reducing the number of abortions."

Faith leaders joining Gushee and Harkins in endorsing the measure included Joel Hunter, senior pastor of Northland Church in central Florida; Rabbi David Saperstein of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism; and author and activist Brian McLaren.