

Methodists promote drug discount card: United Methodist Church makes card available to members

by [John Dart](#) in the [April 6, 2004](#) issue

The news in early March that all United Methodists could receive a free drug discount card with savings up to 65 percent appeared at first glance to be a bold health-care step by a major denomination in the light of national disputes over how to help the nation's uninsured.

The card was available to all 8.3 million of the denomination's members, whether or not they have medical insurance, who in turn may give the special Methodist discount number to needy nonmembers so they too can obtain cards, said the United Methodist Association of Health and Welfare Ministries (UMA). The association serves 400 Methodist-related hospitals, retirement homes and children's facilities.

"We have many people falling through the cracks," Mearle Griffith, president and CEO of the UMA, told United Methodist News Service. "They're choosing between taking all of the drugs they need and groceries."

But as Griffith and his wife later checked out the Web site of [Destinationrx.com](#), they found that discounts at the Los Angeles-based company on prescription drugs, nonprescription drugs and other medical supplies typically ranged from 20 to 30 percent. Also, the Web site in mid-March said those registering online could join free (no need for a special Methodist number) and order drugs for 20 to 50 percent off regular prices.

The United Methodist News Service revised its original March 8 news release to say the Methodist card gives discounts up to 50 (not 65) percent and that [Destinationrx](#) has contracts with 25,000 pharmacies, including Eckerd's, Kmart and Target, but not CVS and Walgreen's as first stated.

Despite the modified descriptions, Griffith and other Methodists said the evolving program and surrounding publicity were likely to assist many people who are uninsured or underinsured and wary of deals on discounted medicine.

Though President Bush in December signed a law making changes in Medicare, including optional drug discount cards for seniors starting in May, many Democrats and some conservative Republicans criticized the plan as either benefiting mostly drug companies or costing too much.

An official with the Illinois-based Park Ridge Center for the Study of Health, Faith and Ethics commended the United Methodist Association for taking a practical initiative. "For once, a church with connections . . . is using them to achieve some concrete good," said David McCurdy, director of organizational ethics at the center. "So often it seems that we in the church have been hesitant to dirty our hands by collaborating with the business enemy," McCurdy told the Century, speaking cautiously until more is known about the church-linked program.

Mainline churches generally focus on urging federal support for comprehensive health coverage, "but it's better to do what we can, when we have a chance, rather than wait for the utopian option that's unlikely to arrive in the foreseeable future," McCurdy said. "If that means an alliance with for-profit business, the UMC/UMA has evidently decided, so be it: Praise God and pass the medications."

The church-related program did not start out big. Two years ago a unit of the United Methodists' General Board of Global Ministries began looking into a prescription drug discount plan as a "social justice" issue to help members, especially the working poor, according to consultant Jane Ehrman. "Several 'suppliers' were reviewed and a good opinion was formed of Destinationrx, but the matter never came to a decision by the board of directors," said board spokesman Elliott Wright.

"We are keen on as many people as possible having access to affordable prescription drugs and medical supplies," Wright said. But those who studied the idea said the board lacked the personnel to manage the program, and as a result handed it off to UMA for consideration.

Griffith, a minister and the CEO of the Dayton, Ohio-based UMA, said in an interview that he conceived the plan primarily as a benefit for people in retirement homes. The average age of United Methodists is 57, according to church figures. The deal with Destinationrx was announced at the UMA national conference March 4-7 in

Nashville.

Having received dozens of news media inquiries about the Methodist-only card, Griffith said he decided the association should make it available to anyone who could dial the company's 800 number and mention the Methodists' program. Asked if there were any product restrictions, Griffith said there were none he knew of. "Birth control pills are covered as well as Viagra prescriptions," he said.

"We expanded this plan in a matter of days from a denominational program to an opportunity to serve anyone," he said. "I'm not interested in putting up roadblocks." Griffith said he expects to report on the plan at the 11-day United Methodist Conference in Pittsburgh that starts April 27.