

## Working with the Faith Community: Reflections from a National Faith Leader

Barbara Baylor, Minister for Health and Wellness at the national office for the United Church of Christ, spoke at Families USA's Health Action 2006 conference at a plenary called "Faith and Justice: The Religious Rationale for Health Care." During her speech, Ms. Baylor identified several tips and practical strategies for engaging and working with the faith community around health care issues, particularly drawing from her work with congregations that represent communities of color.

### Tips for Working with the Faith Community



#### **Help connect the dots:**

- Religious institutions may need assistance in making the connection between their charity work and health policy and advocacy. If they are already involved in a certain type of health work, don't try to change or refocus those efforts. Instead, work with them to show how getting involved in policy and advocacy can strengthen their goals.
- Show the faith community the problems firsthand. For example, visiting local hospitals or public health agencies will help raise awareness of various health issues.
- Collect personal stories from congregation members and highlight them in church materials. For example, advocates can talk with congregants about their experiences and how they have been directly affected by a lack of access to health care. Then, once these stories are collected, you may be able to get them published in the church bulletin or Sunday program.
- Basing your message on the scriptures is likely to resonate with the faith community. In other words, communicate in their language instead of using the technical jargon advocates may use when working with other types of communities.



### **Communicate effectively:**

- In order to cultivate a meaningful and effective partnership with the faith community, advocates must understand the traditions and the mission of the faith community with which they are seeking to work. Advocates must also stay in constant dialogue with the specific community, including asking them what they need in order to participate in the partnership.
- Work with the media department at the national, state, and regional offices to get information out to the local churches.



### **Respect institutional norms and values:**

- Many religious institutions have regional or national offices that you will need to contact to gain entry to specific denominations. Pitching the partnership idea to the appropriate governing body is a good first step to take.
- When beginning a relationship with a new faith institution, research what policies, regulatories, resolutions, pronouncements, and statements have already been written and adopted by that particular institution. Integrate these documents into any resources that you plan to produce with the faith community.



### **Identify natural partners and allies:**

- Many churches are already involved in the health care movement and are good places to start—keeping in mind that you may also need to contact their national or regional staff. When working with these churches, you will need to begin identifying the people who are responsible for social justice or health ministries, parish nurses, or other relevant positions. Many times, there are members in the church who are already working on health care issues, so advocates will want to speak to those individuals and work in partnership with them. Keeping the appropriate clergy involved is also a must when developing a successful relationship.
- Also keep in mind that there may be different points of entry depending on the racial and ethnic makeup of the congregation you'd like to work with. Take some time to get to know the values and culture of the group so as not to inadvertently offend anyone or step on anyone's toes.

**Be flexible:**

- Being flexible when working with the faith community is absolutely essential. You may encounter issues that the institution is grappling with—such as staff changes—that will require adapting your plans and strategies to the circumstances within the particular congregation.
- When developing an action plan, advocates must always include the faith community in the planning and development process *from the beginning*. That way, they will have a truly vested interest in seeing the plan come to fruition. However, never push faith leaders into taking on more work than they are ready for.
- Recognize the difference between *faith-based* initiatives and *faith-placed* initiatives. *Faith-based* initiatives involve the congregation in each step of the planning and development stages, and include real and meaningful input from congregation members. *Faith-placed* initiatives, on the other hand, tend to merely take place on location at the faith-based institution with no real partnership between the sponsoring organization and the faith community.
- Planning when your meetings with the faith group take place is also very important. Providing food and working around people's schedules is essential to being inclusive.

**Work for today by building for tomorrow:**

- When working with the faith community, capacity building must be a large component of your action plan. Designing your activity to empower, equip, and strengthen the faith community for sustained work is the best and most lasting way to go. This process includes nurturing and maintaining your relationship with the congregation over time.
- If your group doesn't work at the local level, you can still identify community organizations and advocacy groups that the religious institution could work with in their own vicinity so that they can sustain their involvement in health care advocacy.

Lastly, keep in mind that the faith community is diverse, multi-talented, committed, and has been involved in social justice for a long time. This is key to building and maintaining a genuine relationship with this important constituency.

This checklist was adapted from a presentation given by Barbara Baylor at Families USA's Health Action 2006 Conference.

A video and full transcript of her speech is available online at <http://www.familiesusa.org/conference/2006-conference-summary-1.html>.  
Click on "View webcasts of the plenaries."

For more information on Families USA's Minority Health Initiatives, contact Rea Pañares, Director of Minority Health Initiatives or Briana Webster-Patterson, Program Manager at [minorityhealth@familiesusa.org](mailto:minorityhealth@familiesusa.org) or 202-628-3030.



1201 New York Avenue NW, Suite 1100 ▪ Washington, DC 20005  
Phone: 202-628-3030 ▪ Fax 202-347-2417  
E-mail: [info@familiesusa.org](mailto:info@familiesusa.org) ▪ Web site: [www.familiesusa.org](http://www.familiesusa.org)