

INTERFAITH LEADERS INVOKE MORALITY IN HEALTHCARE DEBATE

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Let the politicians and lobbyists argue about copayments and premiums. The Rev. Hurmon Hamilton and Rabbi Jonah Pesner are waging their fight to expand healthcare coverage on a different, higher plane.

"We don't have anything in the game but the people we represent," Hamilton said on a windswept corner outside his Roxbury Presbyterian Church. "When we're out there, we really are concerned about the 750,000 people without healthcare, and a large majority of those people are in our pews. We see them, touch them, preach to them, pray for them, visit them."

Hamilton and Pesner, of Temple Israel in Boston, are leaders of the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, which has used moral suasion to become an influential force in Beacon Hill's healthcare debate. Inside the velvet glove, though, is a real threat: If legislators don't pass a healthcare bill to their liking, the group and its allies will push a 2006 ballot measure that would force the state to cover everybody. Backers of the ballot effort have collected more than 112,000 signatures.

At a recent State House rally, Hamilton warned lawmakers not to "waste this opportunity to create real reform."

"We will make it clear now, today, that we will rise up if this should take place, from Williamstown to Georgetown, from Gloucester to Worcester, from Duxbury to Foxborough," he said. "From all across this Commonwealth, we will rise up, take care of reform at the polls, but hold you accountable."

The interfaith organization's greatest coup so far has been persuading House Speaker Salvatore F. DiMasi to endorse a so-called employer mandate that would require businesses to cover their workers or pay a tax. DiMasi predicts that the organization, which includes 65 religious congregations and community groups, will be "a substantial influence on what will happen" as House and Senate negotiators work out a compromise between competing plans.

DiMasi is an old North End politician who has been in the Legislature for 28 years, long enough to know that issues that seem black and white outside the State House tend to shade to gray inside it. But recently he has been speaking with the zeal of a convert, not the caution of a politician, when he talks about the employer mandate, which Governor Mitt Romney and Senate President Robert E. Travaglini oppose.

"I'm inspired tonight! I feel like saying, 'Hallelujah!' " DiMasi proclaimed at a recent interfaith organization rally at the Bethel AME Church in Jamaica Plain. "They have lobbyists, and they certainly know how to talk. But they can't pray like you in this room!"

Hamilton and Pesner were so thrilled by DiMasi's bill and its resemblance to the measure that the interfaith organization and its allies plan to put on the ballot, that they joined DiMasi at the State House to unveil it.

"Every human being is created in the image of God. And if it's so, then every human body is a sacred vessel," Pesner said at that event. "Together we will create a coalition of compassion, and we will do what we know to be right, to be just, to be merciful: to bring healthcare access and affordability to each and every member of the Commonwealth."

Hamilton went further, suggesting that DiMasi's plan was divinely inspired.

"God has without doubt been working behind the scenes through the courageous efforts of our speaker and the leadership of the House," he said.

Hamilton and Pesner have forged a friendship despite their disparate backgrounds. Hamilton, 41, who grew up in tiny Coushatta, La., arrived at Roxbury Presbyterian a decade ago. In part, his passion for the healthcare fight comes from personal experience: He believes that a lack of health insurance shortened the lives of his mother, the great-aunt who raised him after his mother became ill, and his grandmother. As an infant, Hamilton spent a year in the hospital after he had a severe allergic reaction to a drug; his scalp is covered with scars.

Pesner, 37, came to Temple Israel in 1999 after serving as assistant rabbi at a synagogue in tony Westport, Conn. He

grew up in Greenwich Village in a family that had health insurance; his father was a lawyer and his mother was an art dealer. When he was 14, Pesner's father died after a long illness, and he is grateful for the care that extended his life.

"Healthcare isn't just a conversation for the elites at the State House," he said. "This is about real people's real stories and real concerns."

Some aren't completely comfortable with how the interfaith organization has injected morality into a complex issue.

Michael J. Widmer of the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, a business-funded nonprofit, pointed out that there is a consensus that the Bay State should expand healthcare coverage. The question and it isn't a moral one, he said is whether an employer mandate advances the goal.

In a report released last week, the Taxpayers Foundation argued that forcing employers to cover their workers or pay a payroll tax will create a disincentive for them to provide coverage, since in many cases the payroll tax would be cheaper.

Business leaders also warned that the measure will cost the state jobs.

"Healthcare is so complicated that it is critical that what the Legislature does is thoughtful and actually achieves the common goal," Widmer said.

"It's not enough to seize the moral high ground," he said. "The real test is, does it work?"

DiMasi, prodded by the interfaith organization, appears to have made his decision.

At the Bethel AME Church, Hamilton put DiMasi on the spot. Pointing out that businesses are lobbying hard against the employer mandate, he asked the speaker "to pledge to us, and to the people of the Commonwealth tonight, that you will continue to stand firm."

DiMasi didn't hesitate, calling the employer mandate "absolutely necessary."

"I am really committed to convincing the Senate that that is the absolute way to go," he said.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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