

Peninsula Interfaith Action is a member of the PICO National Network which co-sponsored this conference call with President Obama on August 19. Of the 140,000 participants nationwide, well over 300 were Peninsula residents who participated because they were invited through a PIA-led outreach effort in our member congregations.

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PENINSULA INTERFAITH ACTION
1336 ARROYO AVENUE TEL: 650-592-9181
SAN CARLOS, CA 94070-3913 FAX: 650-592-9183

Obama turns to faith leaders

By [JOSH GERSTEIN](#) | 8/20/09 12:00 PM EDT

With his **health reform** efforts on the ropes, President Barack Obama is courting the religious community with an unabashedly moral message that played little role in the White House's earlier arguments for changing America's health care system.

Speaking on a conference call Wednesday evening with what organizers estimated were 140,000 members of churches and religious groups, Obama also suggested that some critics of his health care proposals were violating the Biblical commandment against lying.

"I know there's been a lot of misinformation in this debate and there are some folks out there who are, frankly, bearing false witness," Obama said on the call, which was played out live on the Internet. "I need you to spread the facts and speak the truth."

The **president faulted opponents** of his proposals for circulating "ludicrous ideas" aimed at frightening the public about the prospect of reform.

"This notion that somehow we are setting up death panels that will decide whether elderly people get to live or die: that is just an extraordinary lie," Obama said emphatically. He said a provision in House legislation that would authorize payment for end-of-life counseling was "entirely voluntary" and would simply put the poor or middle class on par with wealthier Americans.

"It gives you an option that people who can afford fancy lawyers already exercise," the president said.

However, Obama seemed to concede that critics of his efforts had won the upper hand in the public relations battle. He said his opponents have succeeded in raising the fears of elderly Americans that reform to the **health insurance** system could jeopardize Medicare.

"Many of you have older members of your congregations. They're all now scared to death that somehow we're talking about cutting Medicare benefits," Obama said. "That is, again, simply not true."

In an odd bit of messaging, Obama urged the religious communities, many of which offer outreach and even sanctuary to illegal aliens, not to believe reports that health reform would cover foreigners in the U.S. illegally.

“That’s not true. It does not provide health insurance for those individuals,” Obama said.

Obama also insisted the plan would not provide government funding for abortion.

“These are all fabrications that have been put out there in order to discourage people from meeting what I consider to be a core ethical and moral obligation: that is that we look out for one another, that I am my brother’s keeper, I am my sister’s keeper. In the wealthiest nation on earth right now, we are neglecting to live up to that call,” Obama said.

Obama did not take questions after his six-minute statement on the teleconference. However, earlier Wednesday he did take questions submitted in advance by Rabbis.

Religious metaphors and imperatives were in full force during the calls, which were part of an effort by religious groups to organize “40 days” of action for health care reform.

“We are God’s partners in matters of life and death,” Obama said during the call with Jewish leaders, according to a post on Twitter by Washington-area Rabbi Jack Moline.

During the afternoon call, Obama did not address the hottest issues in the health reform debate at the moment: whether the White House-backed plan will include a **government-run health plan** open to all Americans, known as the “public option.”

Before Obama spoke, his domestic policy adviser, Melody Barnes, did get a question about the president’s stance. She did not answer it immediately, but later returned to the subject. She assured participants that Obama still supports a public option, though she said there might also be other ways to reduce costs and give Americans more choices.

“He believes the public option is the best way to achieve those goals. He’s also said that he’s open to other good ideas,” Barnes said. “But, at this point, he thinks the public option seems like the best one and the best way to lower costs and increase competition.”