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An Air of Hostility

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In recent months, television news shows have provided a grandstand view of our national elected leaders engulfed in heated and disrespectful arguments. While they are supposedly focused on health care reform, the issue goes far beyond health care. The debates have taken on a very unhealthy air of hostility. It has become personalized. It has moved from debating about the issue to personal attacks that question the character and integrity of the other person.

Insulting our leaders in public forums seems to have become an acceptable form of behavior. For example, Congressional leaders themselves regardless of party line have admitted that they have never experienced this blatant disrespect for a President of the United States. Some are shocked by the behaviors while others don't seem to think there's anything to be concerned about. We could, and often do, blame our leaders in Washington. We say that they should be modeling courteous communication, but that just gets us off the hook for our own lack of civility in our human interactions.

These same hostile behaviors are present in our every day lives – not only in Washington. Local town hall gatherings across the country, meant to open dialogue about health care, seem to have taken on a similar air of hostility. The issue seems much broader than health care. Gauging from some of the interactions I've observed in the last few months, this culture of disrespect is being demonstrated in the marketplace, on our streets and highways, in our neighborhoods, in our work places, in our own households, and in our churches. We seem unable to give the other the benefit of the doubt. Instead we leap to assumptions that the other person is out to get us. The display we've seen on television among our elected leaders is similarly displayed right here at home, where ever that is.

The health care reform debate is about more than about health care. Unfortunately, it has brought out hate filled accusations and attacks on each others' values and integrity in ways that I have not seen before. Some of the letters we have received in the offices of the United Church of Christ go far beyond the particular issue; they stream off into hostile name calling and damnation. In Justice and Witness Ministries we will respect the differences of opinion on this matter, but will not accept nor respond to the mean spirited, hateful attacks on our character.

We will continue to call people of faith to engage in the work of transforming our nation's health care system into a just and compassionate system of healing. We as a community of faith will proclaim that health care for all is the mark of a just and compassionate society. We have the power to change the conversation and envision a society where each person is afforded health, wholeness, and human dignity. We will continue to appeal to our constituents to make our democracy work through respectful debate and full participation.

Just like millions of others, I too was terribly disturbed at the outburst on the Congressional floor. However, we cannot demand that our elected leaders behave in civilized and respectful negotiation if we are not willing to look first at ourselves in all our interactions. Have hostility, anger, and suspicion become the standard for human relationships in this country? I truly hope not, but until we accept responsibility for our own behavior, we can expect a degraded culture of communications to continue. We should be the creators, not the products, of our cultural norms. Time will tell as we watch this issue play out in our country.

The United Church of Christ has more than 5,700 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenantal relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.