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Catholic board member resigns over health reform

Christina Lee Knauss Catholic News Service | Apr. 30, 2010

COLUMBIA, S.C. -- A Columbia attorney has resigned from the board of directors of the Sisters of Charity Foundation of South Carolina because he disagrees with the Cleveland-based Sisters of Charity Health System's stand on health care legislation.

Kevin Hall, a member of St. Joseph Church in Columbia, served on the board for seven years, including two years as president.

The Sisters of Charity Health System is a ministry of the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine, and oversees Providence Hospital and Providence Hospital Northeast in Columbia. The foundation works to address the needs of the poor in South Carolina through a variety of programs and grants.

Hall said he objected to the fact that the Sisters of Charity agreed with the Catholic Health Association in supporting the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, signed into law by President Barack Obama March 23. He also objected to a March 22 statement released by Sister Judith Ann Karam, the chief executive and president of the health system, which said passage of the legislation was an important step toward improving access to health care.

"I believe the sisters made a grave error in supporting a health care bill that subsidizes abortion, allows federal funds to be used for abortion, and makes those who are morally opposed to abortion complicit by way of subsidy in the abortions of others," Hall said in a phone interview with The Miscellany, diocesan newspaper in Charleston.

Hall also said the health care legislation does not contain a conscience clause that would protect Catholic health care workers.

"I don't question the sisters' motives or honesty or good will at all," he said. "I have great respect for every one of them, but I think they're grievously wrong."

Sister Judith Ann disagreed with Hall's allegations.

"We strongly believe, and are in accord with the Catholic Health Association and other health care providers, that this legislation would not provide federal funding for abortions and also includes many safeguards to ensure this does not happen," she said in a written statement. "To be very clear, our hospitals and our health system will never support legislation that allows federal funding for abortion.

"The Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine have remained steadfast in our commitment to Catholic and Christian values," she said. "In communion with the church, we have long championed health care reform that expands coverage while protecting life from the moment of conception to death. To say that we would support any legislation that would enable federal funds to be used for abortion is simply not true."

Sister Judith Ann also said "the legislation does contain important conscience protections for health care workers by protecting providers' ability to adhere to Catholic ethical framework and values in the delivery of care."

The legislation has caused disagreement among Catholic groups nationwide. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops opposed the legislation, and Bishop Robert E. Guglielmone sent a letter to Catholics in the Diocese of Charleston stating his opposition.

Other Catholic groups, including the CHA, supported the legislation. Both sides have debated the exact implications of the bill's language on abortion funding, and the effectiveness of a subsequent executive order by President Obama, which continues current bans on federal funding for abortion.

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