



NORTHEASTERN PENNSYLVANIA SYNOD

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The Rev. CHRISTOPHER deFOREST
Bishop

A Pastoral Message from Bishop deForest Regarding Portico Rate Increases for 2027

Monday, August 24, 2026

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I am writing today in response to Portico's announcement Thursday of a **15% base rate increase for its health benefit plans in 2027**.

I know this news is difficult to receive. A 15% increase is a significant departure from the 4–5% annual increases many of us have experienced in recent years. For congregations carefully balancing ministry priorities, compensation, and increasingly difficult budgets, this will have a real financial impact.

I also want to say at the outset that **we bishops of ELCA Region 7 are working together** in response to this news. We have been in conversation about the impact these increases will have on congregations and rostered ministers and about how we can help our synods and congregations navigate what lies ahead.

I also want to acknowledge directly that **this letter is modeled closely on the pastoral letter written by my colleague, Bishop Nathan Piphio of the New England Synod, with his permission**. I found his approach helpful and pastoral, and many of the same concerns and opportunities apply here in the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod.

Portico first shared this anticipated increase with the Conference of Bishops earlier this month, and we met with Portico leaders last week. Through our representation on the Portico Board and in conversation with Portico, we have made clear our very real concerns about the effect these increases will have on congregations and rostered ministers.

No one—including Portico—wants health benefit costs to increase at this level.

But I also want to be careful that, in our understandable frustration, **we do not lose sight of something important: Portico has done a remarkably faithful job of holding down our health benefit costs for many years**. For **more than a decade**, Portico has generally kept annual rate increases **below 5%**, even as the broader American health care marketplace has experienced repeated and, in many years, double-digit increases.

So while a 15% increase for 2027 is a shock and will create genuine hardship, it is important to recognize Portico's many years of work to absorb and manage rising health care costs on behalf of the church. We can be concerned about this year's increase while also **expressing gratitude for that faithful work**.

As I have been thinking and praying about this news, I want to offer three thoughts: **some good news, some difficult news, and an invitation to work together.**

1. Some good news.

Portico has been working intentionally to broaden the pool of people participating in its health benefit program. One recent example is the addition of approximately **525 employees of Ascentria Care Alliance** here in the northeast U.S. to Portico's coverage pool. As the number of ELCA congregations and rostered ministers changes, Portico has also been seeking opportunities to serve ELCA seminaries, colleges, universities, and Lutheran service organizations.

A larger pool can help spread risk and give Portico greater leverage in negotiating with providers and other partners in the health care marketplace. This is important work and reminds us that the long-term health of our benefit system depends not only on individual congregations, but on the strength and breadth of the larger community participating in it.

2. The difficult news.

The American health care system is putting extraordinary pressure on everyone. Portico does not operate in a vacuum. The system in which it purchases and provides coverage is experiencing significant increases in the cost of care, prescription drugs, hospital services, physician services, and other medical expenses.

Across the country, insurers are requesting substantial premium increases for 2027. According to a recent review of proposed 2027 Marketplace rates, the **median proposed increase nationally is approximately 15%**. The increases are particularly striking in the states surrounding us:

- **Pennsylvania – 17.1%**
- **New York – 20.7%**
- **New Jersey – 20.4%**
- **Maryland – 13.7%**
- **Portico – 15%**

These Marketplace rates are not directly comparable, benefit-for-benefit, with Portico plans. They are offered as context for the larger health care environment in which Portico is operating.

The point is not to suggest that a 15% Portico increase is insignificant. **It is significant.** But Portico is facing the same extraordinary pressures affecting health insurers and employers throughout the country. Insurers and analysts point to rising prices for medical services and prescription drugs, increased utilization, higher hospital and physician costs, inflation throughout the economy, and increasing labor costs in the health care sector. This is a complicated problem with no single cause or simple solution.

3. We are in this together.

The ELCA's 2003 Social Statement on Health Care, *Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor*, reminds us that the Christian Church is called to be an active participant in fashioning a just and effective health care system. It says:

“Advocacy for public policy is also a responsibility of individuals acting in their calling as Christians and citizens. As members of the ELCA, we support a comprehensive approach to health care as a shared endeavor among individuals, churches, government, and the wider society.”

That is an important word for us now.

Anger, frustration, disappointment, and even fear are understandable responses to a 15% increase. I certainly understand and feel them myself. But can we channel those feelings toward the larger challenge before us: **How do we work together to build a health care system that is more just, sustainable, and accessible for all?**

That includes telling our stories to elected representatives. Rising health care costs affect Democrats, Republicans, independents, and people who do not identify with any political party. Whatever our political differences, this is a challenge we are called to address as citizens and people of faith.

At the same time, all of us as pastors, deacons, congregational presidents, treasurers, council, and members, are asking, **“What does this mean for our congregation?”**

There is a practical step you can take now: **If you have access to Portico’s EmployerLink, log in and use the Benefits Cost Estimator to develop a new estimate of your congregation’s 2027 health benefit costs based on the announced rate increases.**

Doing this now will give council and finance leaders a concrete number for the 2027 budgeting conversation and help move from general anxiety to a clearer understanding of what the increase means for your congregation and rostered ministers.

Begin these conversations early. Talk with your pastor or deacon, treasurer and council, and compensation committee. Where helpful, talk with your Dean, Associate, and Synod staff.

You are not alone. No one of us needs to make decisions about compensation, benefits, or ministry staffing in isolation. We are a church that belongs to one another.

Here in the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod, in my remaining days in office, I will continue working with our Associates of the Bishop, Deans, Synod Finance Committee, Synod Council, and others about the impact of these increases and ways we might support one another. When she takes office September 1, Bishop Jennifer Dee will also be ready to take her place with our servant leaders in NEPS, to support you, and to make your voices heard. Our seven Region 7 bishops will continue talking with one another as we seek to learn from one another and advocate for the well-being of the people and congregations we serve.

I also encourage you to be in conversation with one another. Creative approaches, partnerships, and practices emerging in one congregation may help another. This challenge may require difficult questions, but it may also invite us to imagine new ways of sharing resources, strengthening partnerships, and supporting the ministry to which God has called us. The conversations many congregations are having, about working together as a 6261 ministry community, can play a significant role in addressing rising health care costs.

Keep our eyes on Jesus

A few weeks ago, the Gospel told of Jesus walking across the waves in a storm to meet the disciples in their battered boat. Peter stepped out and began walking toward Jesus. But when he took his eyes off Jesus and focused on the wind and waves, he began to sink.

There is something important for us in that story today. The waters around us are genuinely rough. The Portico increase will create real financial challenges.

But now is not the time to panic, abandon the boat, turn against one another, or imagine we must face this challenge alone. Now is the time to keep our eyes on Jesus.

And when we do, we discover that Jesus is already present—in the people around our council tables, in our congregations, in our Deans and Associates, Synod staff, Region 7 colleagues, and the wider church.

Jesus meets us in one another.

So let us listen to one another. Let us tell the truth about our challenges. Let us give credit where credit is due and recognize Portico's many years of faithful work to hold down our costs. Let us advocate for a more just and sustainable health care system. Let us use available resources to make wise financial decisions. Let us share ideas, support one another, and remain open to the creative work of the Holy Spirit.

We may not know exactly what the next year will bring. But we do know this: **we do not enter these waters alone.**

Christ is with us.

And the same Spirit who has sustained the Church through every generation is still calling us to be the Church together—in this moment, in this place, and in the years ahead.

Thank you for the faithful ministry you offer every day, for your patience and care for the people entrusted to you, and for the ways you continue to serve Christ and your neighbors, even when circumstances are difficult. Please know that you are in my prayers, and that the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod staff will continue to walk with you as we face this challenge together.

In Christ and with gratitude,

Bishop Christopher deForest
Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America