

LA CROIX

In the United States, churches to the aid of Americans in debt for their health

By Gilles Biassette, special envoy to Winston-Salem (North Carolina), 7/28/2023 at 10:46 a.m

In the United States, getting sick is, for many, an unaffordable luxury. Almost one in two Americans is in debt after going to the hospital, for a total amount of nearly \$ 200 billion. A colossal weight that some Churches manage to attenuate.



The man parked his pickup at the corner of Sprague Street, near the Trinity Moravian Church. One file in hand, he timidly approaches the red brick building and asks to speak to the pastor. His mother has just died, he explains. He needs help paying for the funeral. Reverend John listens to him. As a child, says the visitor, he attended church with his mother. He has had fond memories of it. So he decided to knock on this door today.

John Jackman listens carefully. He takes the file, notes a phone number. The man leaves for his pickup. *“It's pretty classic,”* explains the pastor of the Trinity Moravian Church, in Winston-Salem. *“He has little money, and finds himself having to pay his mother's debts.”* Including medical debts, a real American burden.

Another 8% of Americans without health insurance

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, almost one in two Americans owes money to a hospital, a dentist, etc. In more than half of the cases, the slate is between 1,000 and 10,000 dollars, for a total amount estimated at the astronomical sum of nearly 200 billion dollars... With Barack Obama's health reform, the number of people without medical insurance has dropped sharply in the United States, reaching a historic low. But 8% of Americans still live without a net in the event of a health problem (against 15% in the early 2010s).

Proportion rising in the South

The proportion is rising in the South, poorer and more rural, as in North Carolina, where more than one in ten inhabitants lives on the razor's edge. For primary care, free centers exist but in insufficient numbers. In Raleigh, the state capital, the Alliance Medical Ministry, is refueling. *« Here, we only deal with benign cases, or the follow-up of chronic diseases, such as diabetes,* explains Pete Tannenbaum, director of this dispensary. *For the rest, direction the emergency room. Insured or not, patients should be treated. But after the invoices arrive. »*

To the point of giving up marriage...

These bills can go up very quickly. Getting sick in the United States can be a luxury. Staying alive at a price. As with one man who left his hospital bed with a huge debt after spending several months in intensive care. Marriage plans were set aside when they realized that the debt collectors could take the property of his wife if they were married.

In a country where credit is king, where each inhabitant is “rated” by private organizations for the management of its repayments, dragging out unpaid payments is

a real handicap. *“Having debts means being harassed, sometimes even at work,”* explains John Jackman. *“It’s also having a harder time accessing credit, buying a car, for example, or renting an apartment”*

So Pastor John decided to act. He mobilized his church to raise funds, and perform miracles: in a few months, the Trinity Moravian Church has managed to pay more than \$ 3.3 million in debt in the region. *« In the United States, organizations that have debtors, such as hospitals for example, have the option of reselling these debts to collection agencies, for a price much lower than their initial value, explains Pastor John. This allows hospitals, convinced after a while that they will never find their funds, to save the furniture. »*

An NGO against this “American injustice”

Hence the possibility of then buying back, for cheap, a large debt from these collection agencies. To erase more than \$ 3.3 million, the Trinity Moravian Church only needed to raise \$ 5,000. In the spring, a small ceremony was organized in the church, the video went viral on social media. The phone calls multiplied, the donations poured in. Another lap canceled an additional 3.6 million, and a new celebration is scheduled for August 9.

But Jackman remains modest: after all, he did not invent anything. This is because he heard of the initiative of another church, with the help of RIP Medical Debt, an NGO created in 2014 by two former collection professionals responsible for remorse, that he started. To fight this issue, RIP Medical Debt raises – funds from individuals, businesses, etc. – to help families earning up to four times the federal level of poverty and those whose medical debt represents more than 5% of annual income.

“We don't know the beneficiaries,” Jackman says. *“What we are saying to RIP Medical Debt is that we want to help families in this or that county. The NGO, which has access to certain private data, identifies families in need and buys back their debts. Families then receive a letter, telling them that they are now free, rid of that weight.”*

Nearly \$ 10 billion in debt written off

To date, RIP Medical Debt has drawn a line under nearly \$ 10 billion in medical debt. Thanks, for a significant part, to the mobilization of the Churches. *“We started working with religious organizations in 2018,”* explains Daniel Lempert, head of communication for the NGO. *“Since then, more than 300 of them have joined us, helping more than 830,000 people and abolishing more than a billion dollars in medical debt.”*

If the beneficiaries remain anonymous, it is however possible to target certain populations, as did the First Presbyterian Church in Durham. *“Last year, we wanted to raise funds to restore our church. As we do every time in this kind of situation, we also wanted to launch a project to help the local population,”* explains Pastor Mindy Douglas. *“We have chosen a county with a large African-American population. It is part of our repair effort, after the discrimination suffered by African-Americans.”* Some \$ 26,000 has been raised, wiping out a collective burden estimated at more than \$ 5 million.

Health figures in the United States

Medical expenses exploded in the United States since the last decades of the 20th century: all actors combined, America spends nearly \$ 4 trillion annually on health, against 1,300 billion in 2000 (718 billion in 1990).

According to the federal government website, putting a broken leg back on its feet can be up to \$ 7,500, and the average cost of three days of hospitalization is approximately \$ 30,000.

If the system is primarily based on private insurance (with franchise mechanism, etc.), there is a public health program for people over 65 (Medicare) and for people on low incomes (Medicaid).

Since the reform of Barack Obama, more and more people are covered by Medicaid (nearly 100 million Americans today).

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