

LINKING FAITH AND HEALTH

It is not easy in this secular age of specialization to make the link between faith and health. Yet, as the web of a spider trembles when one tiny thread is severed, so too our life supports are threatened when a single link is broken, whether it be the link between faith and health, body and spirit, individual and family, or society and biosphere.

From the beginning, often without knowing it, churches have been involved as agencies of health, healing and keeping people well. But as chaos surrounds us, as life fragments rather than integrates, there are signs that we are being asked to do even more. To have a parish nurse in churches and agencies today is to reclaim one very old way of bringing the rich tradition of spiritual wealth into the troubled world.

The idea, intended to serve the congregation or agency, and the surrounding community, is rudimentary and extremely simple. It is to help people understand that the body tends to respond to what is going on in the heart, mind and spirit; to help pick up signs of small problems early and find appropriate resources; to discover and help natural care-givers and health care professionals in congregations to do even better what they are already doing well, and finally to share the work of caring with others in the health field.

It is a remarkable opportunity for ministry, as together we prayerfully search for paths to take us creatively into the next millennium.

THE FAITH FACTOR

Health and spirituality were once regarded as the separate domains of medicine and religion. Surprisingly, now they are regarded as complimentary aspects of whole-person health care. This has led to a great opportunity for the Church to reclaim its health and healing ministry. The key for making the connection between health and spirituality is faith. As Thomas A. Droege puts it, "... there is a faith factor in healing."

When we speak about faith, we have moved beyond religion. Now there is the "how" of faith and the "what" of faith. The "how" of faith refers to how one believes, for example, the experience of trust. The "what" of faith refers to what a person trusts or believes. The faith factor is expectant trust in God that facilitates healing in various ways and dimensions of our lives. It affirms the declaration of healing of Jesus, "Your faith has made you well."

Faith, however, is not part of much of the current literature about health. The "in" word is *spirituality*.

Spirituality refers broadly to our human capacity to reflect, form inter-personal relationships and community, emotional attachments, self-awareness and a sense of mystery. Humans alone have spiritual needs for love and relatedness, for forgiveness, for meaning, and for self-esteem.

When our spiritual needs are not met we suffer spiritual “dis-eases” that are just as serious and destructive to our health as physical ills such as loneliness, hopelessness, depression and meaninglessness. Spiritual care for such maladies calls for compassion, listening, touching, loving and forgiving. Our spiritual hunger comes with being human.

Spirituality often gets confused with being “religious.” All persons are spiritual beings whether or not they regard themselves as being religious. Every person has an innate hunger for meaning, hope and belonging, all of which are the characteristic results of being created in the image of God.

Spirituality takes shape in a person’s life by what a person trusts and is loyal to at the centre of his or her life. Spirituality is what a person hopes for in life, what shapes meaning and purpose in every situation throughout life. Ultimately our spiritual needs can only be met in relationship with God. Without that “connectedness” we fall for a kind of secularized spirituality.

Secularized spirituality is limited. The individual yearns for more than can be found in oneself. The “wholeness hunger” of humanity always takes us out of our limited self. That hunger is the boundary between all forms of spirituality and faith. Christ’s healing ministry addresses all of our hungers and moves us across the boundaries.

It is clear in the ministry of Jesus in the Gospels that faith is active in healing. Faith facilitates healing. We cannot live without faith, as Luther reminded us. To be human is to need meaning and purpose in life. We seek to be whole persons. That is obvious to the most casual reader of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, and yet most people do not look to their congregations and parishes for healing.

There are many factors for the erosion of faith in God’s power to heal through the church’s ministry. Many in the pew have bought the “medical” model that undermines faith in forms of spiritual healing.

Perhaps the major reason for the erosion of faith in the power of God to heal is the virtual abandonment of a ministry of healing by the mainline churches. Salvation, which means wholeness, has often been reduced to life after death and faith becomes a “transaction” that gets you there. The focus of the church’s ministry then becomes the “cure of souls” at the heart of which is the forgiveness of sins. We leave the body to medicine. This is a neat division of labour between religion and medicine where healing with faith is factored out.

It is strange that God’s desire and promise to heal, so clear in the Scriptures, is qualified in the church in so many ways today. There is no such qualification on God’s promise to forgive sins. Both are promises of the Gospel and invite faith in return, but faith cannot be a factor if trust in the promise has been undermined.

The church is called to witness to God’s power to heal in the person of Jesus Christ. Christ’s promise of healing continues to be re-presented when the church heals in Christ’s name. The

promise of the divine compassion and healing presence of Jesus Christ is now mediated through the healing ministry of the church. The church gathers to pray and intercede, to hear the ancient stories of healing, to receive Christ through the ordinary means of water, bread and wine, to anoint with oil and lay hands of healing on the sick. There is every reason to expect healing through this ministry, and in a manner that is as ordinary and natural as the healing that comes through medical intervention.

Healing takes place within a relationship to God that is based on faith. Spiritual healing is relational and the faith pull in this relationship is expectant trust. Though faith has always been acknowledged as a factor in healing in the Biblical world view, the power of God to heal through Word and Sacrament is at the center of spiritual healing.

The task of the church is to redirect the faith of its members to God, the source of all healing, medical or otherwise.

The Gospels do not keep us guessing about what Jesus intended for those who came to him for healing. Christ intended for them to be whole in body, mind and spirit. What is easily overlooked, however, is that wholeness includes holiness. Those who are healed become healers. Those who are loved become lovers. Health, in the sense of individual wellness, is always a means to an end and never an end in itself.

The trust of faith must always be complemented by commitment to the way of the cross, the way of the wounded healer. This is the ultimate sign of the faith factor in our lives.

*(This article constitutes a précis of **The Faith Factor in Healing** by Thomas A. Droege, Philadelphia, 1991 which is no longer in print.)*

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