

THE CHURCH AS A HEALTH AND HEALING PLACE

Parish Nursing is a new way of doing ministry. But Parish Nursing does not stand on its own. The concept of the congregation as a health and healing place is the foundation upon which Parish Nursing is built. It is not simply a preamble to Parish Nursing but its cornerstone.

It is essential that we have a solid biblical and theological foundation for anything we do in the church. It is that theological basis and focus that shapes all of the forms that health ministries take in the life and witness of InterChurch Health Ministries as we form partnerships with congregations, agencies and communities.

THE CHURCH AS A HEALING PLACE

Healing was at the heart and centre of Jesus' ministry. About one third of the Gospels are stories and references to Jesus' physically healing people. Healing means restoration, to be made whole. The wholeness God intends for us encompasses body, mind and spirit. It is fullness of life that is God's gift to us, both health and salvation.

If we broaden our definition of "healing" in a Biblical sense to include spiritual and relational healing, then all of the stories about Jesus address some form of healing. Jesus came to "save" and the meaning of that word in its original Greek is "to heal." To make whole! Biblical Greek has only one word for those two terms, depending on the context.

There are countless examples of Jesus' whole-person healing ministry. The story in Mark 2:1-12 is a case in point. Four friends are determined to bring a paralytic into the presence of the healing Christ. They literally raise the roof to get to the Christ as Jesus stands surrounded by a crowd. It is obvious to everyone that they want Jesus to heal their paralyzed friend, but instead of healing the man, Jesus announced, "My son, your sins are forgiven!" We can almost hear the paralytic man's, "Well, that's nice. But it's not really what I had in mind....You might have noticed....."

Instead of healing him, Jesus forgave him.

Not to be outdone, some religious authorities turned it into a theological debate. Who on earth can forgive? Jesus settled the dispute by saying to the paralytic, "Stand up, take your mat and go to your home." And he did.

Whenever we expect Jesus to heal, Jesus forgives, and where Jesus forgives, Jesus also heals. That is the characteristic of whole person healing ministry, and the Gospels are full of stories like that. So are our congregations. Healing is central to Jesus' ministry through the church today. We reclaim the apostolic mandate to preach, teach and heal!

The church has always been engaged in healing ministries throughout history. We see it in the fledgling young church in action in the Book of Acts. This was mainstream Christianity, not some kind of sideline for the “lunatic fringe” of the church. The gifts of healing were bestowed upon the church by the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that enlivens the healing ministry of our congregations today.

The ministry of healing led to the basis of what we now call medicine and health care. The hospital is an invention of the Christian church – a place of hospitality, of care, of community. That is a far cry from one dimensional modern medicine and its in and out, body repair shop masquerading as “health” and “care.” The practice of nursing too has its origins in the church, as another reflection of the healing ministry of Jesus Christ.

The mandate to heal as well as preach the Gospel is the ongoing mission of the local congregation to this day. Like the four friends in Mark’s Gospel, the congregation carries, bears, upholds, loves, supports and brings the sick, the broken, and the despairing to the healing Christ, the source of all health and healing.

THE CHURCH AS A HEALTH PLACE

Today the challenge that faces congregations which seek to reclaim the church’s healing ministry is to provide health ministries as well. Health is a gift of God. In order to be good stewards of this gift of God, congregations need to empower people to take responsibility for their own health, to enable them to be of service to their neighbor. That is the purpose of health.

“Health is not the purpose of life, but enables us to fulfill our life’s purpose.”

Taking responsibility for our own health can be done in a variety of ways, but all of them are related to a need for a change in lifestyle. This is never an easy task. In many cases we now know what makes people sick, how attitude and behavior affect health, and the effects of diet and exercise.

In light of all of this, where does the congregation fit in? Why should the church be active in promoting health? Our rationale is found in the words of Jesus, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. . . fully.” John 10:10. That means eternal life of course, but eternal life is also a present reality. It is here and now. In a sense that means, “I am well. I am whole.”

Whole person health ministry is a tree with one trunk and two branches. One branch is healing ministries and another branch is health promotion.

Healing ministries have always been vitally important to the church for eighteen of its nineteen centuries of history. In order to reclaim that mandate, congregations need also to respond to the unique challenge of health promotion in our day. Instead of asking only “What makes people sick and how can we provide a whole-person healing ministry to heal or save them?” we

also need to ask, “What keeps people well and how can we provide a whole-person health ministry that will keep them that way?” That is the wave of the future in health care and the congregation is the vehicle to enable and empower people to assume responsibility for their own health.

This focus on health promotion is not new. It is present in scripture, especially in the Old Testament, and St. Paul is not above addressing young Timothy’s indigestion, suggesting “a little wine for the stomach’s sake.”

Hygiene was a major concern of Moses and the elders, especially in the wilderness wanderings – the perfect setting for epidemics. The sanitation prescriptions are still valid in many cases; the issues of incest, food restrictions, family relationships and contagious disease are all dealt with.

As part of the support group for Parish Nurses in our pilot projects, a common scripture reading discipline was undertaken beginning with the Gospel of Mark. The participants highlighted all of the passages that directly or indirectly related to health and healing. Reading the seventh chapter of Mark we read:

“They (the Pharisees) noticed that some of his (Jesus’) disciples were eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands – that is, they had not washed them in the way the Pharisees said people should.

For the Pharisees as well as the rest of the Jews, follow the teaching they received from their ancestors: they don’t eat unless they wash their hands in the proper way, nor do they eat anything that comes from the market unless they wash it first. And they follow many other rules which they have received, such as the proper way to wash cups, pots, copper bowls and beds.”

Mark provides this information for his non-Jewish readers unfamiliar with these “health” measures from the Old Testament Book of Leviticus. On reading the text one might say, “I never realized before that Moses must have had a Parish Nurse on staff.”

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