

Our Tradition and Our Challenge

Ministries of Health

Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.

Luke 9:1-2

Deborah White

The bishop and district superintendents of the Mississippi Annual Conference have added a new personal dimension to their Cabinet meetings—telling stories about their personal journeys toward health and wholeness.

Each time they gather the members share prayer concerns and then begin describing how they have been keeping a covenant that outlines goals for exercise, nutrition, rest, spiritual renewal, relationships and congregational health.

“We enter into this covenant because we have the common purpose of obeying Jesus Christ, and because we believe we need one another’s help to do this,” the covenant says.

“Physical ailments have lessened, weight has been lost, sleep has improved,” said Mississippi Bishop Hope Morgan Ward, who asked her cabinet members to sign the covenant in May 2005.

Pastors in several districts have also joined the covenant at the request of their district superintendents.

“My own spiritual journey continues to lead me toward wellness as a focus of Christ’s ministry and our share in it. Christ came healing,” said Ward, who feels the covenant is a means of joy and grace. “John Wesley saw himself as a physician of body as well as soul. This is our heritage and our high calling.”

The Rev. Embra Jackson, administrative assistant to Bishop Ward, learned about a health covenant through his work on the congregational health ministry team of the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM), the denomination’s mission agency. “As leaders of the conference we have to be role models,” Jackson said.

Global ministries’ 11-person health ministry team illustrates a growing emphasis on health and wholeness in The United Methodist Church. Its mission is “to guide United Methodist annual conference leadership in transforming, mobilizing and advocating ministries of health and wholeness in the Wesleyan tradition,” said Cherian Thomas, M.D., executive secretary in health and welfare ministries at GBGM.

John Wesley, Methodism’s founder, believed that every Methodist society should be involved in direct health care. But over the years, care for the body, the mind and the spirit has become separated for many people. The Bible repeatedly puts them together in accounts of Christ’s ministry and in other places throughout both the Old and New Testaments.

“For I am the Lord who heals you.” (Exodus 15:26)

“You shall love the Lord

your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” (Mark 12:30)

“The healing ministry is an integrative part of the church and the ministry of Christ,” Thomas said. “Jesus did preaching, teaching and healing...they all flow into each other. The church needs to observe that.”

One-third of the New Testament deals with healing the sick, pointed out the Rev. Scott Morris, M.D., a physician, United Methodist pastor and executive director of the Church Health Center in Memphis, Tenn.

But often it’s difficult for Christians to see the importance of integrating body, mind and spirit, he said. “We have come to

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believe that the way we relate to God is from the neck up. That isn't right. God breathes into this body and creates a human being where body and spirit are one and inseparable. We're supposed to care for it and honor it. If we don't, we're ignoring what a third of the gospel says."

The Church Health Center provides health care for thousands of low-income people and encourages healthy lifestyles for people of all income levels with a holistic ministry called the Hope and Healing Center. "We at the Church Health Center feel health ministry is as important as the choir," Morris said.

Churches and medical systems need to react more quickly to address "the need to treat the whole person," said Gretchen Breyller-Hegeman, Ph.D., a consultant and trainer in integrative medicine and a member of global ministries' congregational health ministry team.

"I see church reflecting society instead of leading it," she said. "It's lost its edge. There is so much that could be done in terms of having holistic healing centers at large churches or clusters of churches."

Breyller-Hegeman and others believe that the lack of health insurance for millions of people is one of the justice issues the church needs to engage.

"People are hurting. Where people are hurting, we are there. That is all part of the mandate from Jesus," said Marilyn Clement, national coordinator of Healthcare-NOW, an organization in New York City that supports a national single-payer healthcare system for everyone.

Clement, former executive secretary for economic justice for the Women's Division of the Board of Global Ministries, helped form Healthcare-NOW in 2003 with faith groups, labor unions and physicians.

"We need to provide health care for everybody," Clement said. "Is that a responsibility of the church? We think so. It's a responsibility of everybody in the society. A lot of people are looking at it and trying to figure out what to do, because they are hurting."

The Bible includes many examples of Jesus approaching people who were either in poor health or who did not feel whole, said Gil Hanke, a speech-language pathologist in Nacogdoches, Texas, and national president of United Methodist Men.

"They were separated from their community. They had been injured or were alienated from the rest of their community. Those were the ones Jesus sought out. He tells us that's what we should do," said Hanke, who has helped thousands of children as a participant in 22 medical mission trips.

"By being concerned about healthy living we are allowing people to be full stewards of what God has given them," Hanke said.

Sharon Adkins, director of the Center for Parish Nursing and Health Ministries at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville, Tenn., said the church benefits from a holistic approach, too. "A healthier congregation means a healthier church."

Jesus told his disciples to preach, teach

To Learn More

www.gbkm-umc.org/health

www.churchhealthcare.org

www.healthcare-now.org

www.mc.vanderbilt.edu/parishnursing

For additional information about the clergy health covenant in the Mississippi Annual Conference, contact Rev. Embra Jackson at embra@mississippi-umc.org

and heal, but "somehow we've lost the wholeness piece," she said, emphasizing the importance of making health and wholeness a priority.

"Look at Christ's ministry. He was ministering to the entire person. What better reason is there? If we want to get to the nuts and bolts, our society is becoming less and less able to do this kind of support – to be with people, to be present, to do health prevention and promotion. What better way than to integrate that into the faith community?"

"What we are doing is rediscovering our tradition." □

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