

Why Health Ministry?

Good news through a whole-life lens by Rev Scott Morris

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Once when I told a pastor he had diabetes, he refused to believe it. “I do not receive it,” he said. “Whether you receive it or not, you have it,” I responded, the lab report in my hands.

Before putting him on medication, I gave him 90 days. He enrolled in a nutrition class at Church Health Center Wellness, where he had to confess his ignorance about how the body processes various kinds of foods. During the 90 days, his family rallied. His wife came to the cooking classes, and his two daughters launched a family version of “Biggest Loser.” In 90 days, the family lost a collective 60 pounds, and with improved nutrition and movement in his life his disease came under control.

Then he took it to the church. In addition to his own congregation, he helped facilitate a local group of pastors that met regularly. He shared his story. Other pastors got on board, lost significant weight, and encouraged their own congregations to think about health in deliberate ways.

Congregations can be powerhouses of life-giving community. Churches can step up to speak to the world with God’s message of healing—beginning with the people in their own midst who badly need to hear this good news. Health ministry is not about filling the pews with doctors and nurses. The roots are not in science and medicine but in being faithful to the gospel’s call.

A Good News Opportunity

Congregational health ministry is an opportunity for individual members and the faith community as a whole to encounter the good news through a whole-life lens. Scripture teaches us that God created us as body-and-spirit beings right from the start. Genesis 2:7 reminds us the Lord “formed man from the dust of the ground” (body) and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (spirit). Throughout the Bible, we read of God’s care for both physical and spiritual needs—usually at the same time. The call of Scripture is that we are whole people not divided between, but rather united by, body and spirit.

When we step into the opportunity of health ministry, we step into a practice that began with the earliest Christians. Jesus said, “Just as you did it to the least of these ... you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40). Early Christians took these words to heart in ministries of healing. Centuries of church history show us that the faithful opened the earliest hospitals, cared for the poor and marginalized with dignity, and preserved and practiced knowledge of the healing arts. Health ministry, in whatever form it took, reflected the

best knowledge of the day. Congregational health ministry helps contemporary churches do the same.

Health ministry is a lived faith intimately connected to the core of what Jesus did. When Jesus sent his first followers out to do the work he had prepared them for, he sent them to “proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal” (Luke 9:2). As people who follow Jesus now, we are called to do the same. Jesus came that we “may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). The gospel message calls people to God both in body and spirit to experience whole and abundant lives.

The gospel is embodied good news. God created our bodies. Jesus was born into the world with a body and rose from the dead in a physical body. Healing ministry helps us to know God in our bodies as well our spirits and demonstrates the kingdom of God at work. Beginning with Peter’s healing a man lame from birth (Acts 3:6–10), we see the church’s healing ministry welcoming people not only into community but into a kingdom of abundant living.

The Bible uses the word *shalom* to show us God’s vision for what our lives can be. The biblical concept of shalom is a powerful argument that God cares about the well-being of people. The word appears in the Old testament more than 250 times and describes not only a spiritual connection to God, but a life connection—bodily health, contentedness, social relationships. The prophet Isaiah spoke of the Messiah to come as the Prince of Peace, the embodiment of shalom (Isaiah 9:6). Jesus was the fulfillment of the prophecy. Healing of body and spirit point to God’s active presence in this world.

Health means wellness in body and spirit. Even when we fail miserably in the ways we treat our bodies, God comes to us and transforms us. This good news is a wide open opportunity for people of God to live out what we read in the Bible and believe in our minds.

The Gift of Intentionality

Congregational health ministry is people caring for people in areas fundamental to well-being. God saw that the first man should not be alone and created a life partner (Genesis 2:18), creating and blessing relationships right from the start. The New Testament overflows with “one another” language urging us to live in healthy community. One of the things we know about health is that community matters. People do not generally become healthier in isolation, without community support and connections. Health ministry helps people find places to belong in the faith community and feel less alone with the impossibilities they face. Community removes hopelessness—about weight, disease, faith crisis, relationships or any other aspect of life that gets in the way of positive choices. True health is not just the absence of disease. It is embracing the goodness and richness of the life God gives.

Understanding the biblical framework of God’s picture of our whole-life wellness is fundamental to a congregational health ministry. But how do we become intentional about establishing and maintaining health ministries in faith communities?

Examples go a long way. A congregation is only as healthy as its clergy and leaders. In the midst of a busy morning treating patients, a colleague said, “Why are clergy always the most difficult patients? They have the worst diet, they never follow instructions, and they want to second-guess every suggestion I make.”

I knew exactly what she meant. Fifty years ago clergy were one of the top five healthiest professions in American. Now, clergy are 20 percent heavier than the rest of the population and lead the pack for being inactive and stressed out. Clergy are no different than anyone else when it comes to the need to live a healthier life. It turns out, though, that clergy who set good examples for healthy living are as effective at leading in matters of health as they are in matters of spiritual well-being. If we focus on clergy health and start to improve health outcomes of our spiritual leaders, we will see improved health for entire congregations.

Another simple step for congregational health ministry is taking inventory of assets already present. Chances are that the congregation reaches a range of ages and that people have developed caring relationships in multiple small groups (Sunday school classes, mid-week Bible study groups, youth groups, choir practice, leadership teams; the list goes on). People are looking for ways to serve others meaningfully. There are specific individuals people tend to trust with personal information. Love and compassion are strong motivators. People are generous in the face of concrete need. How might all these strengths be marshalled for health ministry that helps people experience a deeper meaning of God’s care for them in practical ways? Each congregation will be different, but it will come down to two things: clergy support for health ministry and one individual answering the call to lead the vision.

Change will happen. If health ministry becomes part of the language of the faith community—in the sense of wellness that includes appropriate medical care yet goes far beyond it—the culture will shift. People will come out of isolation and welcome being part of a community that supports their efforts to make health-sustaining choices. Then the vision will spread to how to bring better health to the wider community, such as by partnering with groups already at work in specific ways.

A Vision of God’s Redemption

The Scriptures as a whole tell the story of God’s redeeming love for humans, from our brokenness in the Garden of Eden of Genesis to the healing resplendent in the new heaven and new earth of Revelation. Healing ministry invites us to yearn together for the healing and justice of God’s redeemed world.

The first time I met Ora, her medical issues were straightforward, so the office visit was ordinary. As I was ready to leave the room, things took a turn. Ora asked, “Do you mind

if I bless you?" I looked at her, eyebrows raised. "I like to know my doctor has the Lord looking out for him," she explained.

No patient had ever offered to say a blessing over me before, but why would I refuse?

Ora grabbed my head with both hands and pulled me to her bosom. With the voice of a revivalist, she called out, "May the Lord anoint you with the Holy Ghost and may all the healing power of the Lord Jesus Christ descend upon you and remain with you from this day forward." After that Ora blessed me at the end of each routine visit. Once she had some olive oil mixed with water from the Jordan River in Israel. She poured the liquid in her hands, then made the sign of the cross on my forehead and on the backs of my hands. "I am blessing your hands," she said, "because throughout the day you will be touching other people like me, and I want you to pass this on."

Ora understood the importance of people of faith active in healing ministry.

If we line ourselves up as one Ora after another, ready to give what we can to healing work, we will see that the church is uniquely poised to lead the efforts for better health in every community.

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