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CONGREGATIONS, SPIRITUALITY, AND HEALTH

PROBLEM: Both medical science and cultural trends have focused attention recently on the connection between faith and healing, a subject about which congregations have had conflicting opinions.

SOLUTION: Through religious services and programs intended to promote health and healing, some congregations are moving to reclaim spirituality's role in health care.

Recently, in a document written by Roman Catholic leaders and approved by Pope John Paul II, the Church expressed concern about the rising popularity of faith-healing services among its members.

The document noted that prayers for health and healing do have a Biblical precedent, but it cautioned that people may be confused about healing services. "In many cases," it said, stories of miraculous healing have led to "the expectation of the same phenomenon in other such gatherings." It suggested that claims of divine healing should be verified by witnesses, and that bishops should keep a close watch on healing services.

This caution reflects tensions within Catholicism, but it also points up important questions for all congregations. What does it mean for people to be healed? And what role can congregations play in helping people find health and healing?

In the Christian tradition, believers point to Jesus' example in the gospels, and the history of the early church, to argue for the reality of physical healing. In *Healing and Christianity*, Episcopal priest Morton Kelsey observes that nearly one-fifth of the gospel narratives is devoted to Jesus' healing ministry.

For a century now, healing has been a hallmark of Pentecostals, who view themselves as reviving a spiritual gift once common among Jesus and his followers, and thereby reclaiming the power of the early church. This view sets them apart from most other conservative Christians.

Many non-Pentecostal conservatives believe that history is divided into "dispensations," each defined by different gifts and a unique relationship with God. Accordingly, believers once had the power to heal people physically, but that gift is unavailable to them now. Other Christians downplay the supernatural elements of the gospels, separating the narratives' meaning from their grounding in historical events.

Both of these views have discouraged belief in miraculous healing. Consequently, Christians have discussed healing primarily as a spiritual concept, as finding a sense of peace with God, one's self, and others. Religion and spirituality might have a role in healing the spirit, but not in curing the body.

But the issue is more complicated than that, because the two realms are not easily separated. One remarkable development within American medicine in the last two decades has been the lowering of barriers between the spiritual and the physical realms. The idea that people's physical health is bound up with their spiritual life is becoming mainstream.

In the early 1990s, for example, only a handful of medical schools offered courses on the connection between spirituality and health. Now, more than 60 of 125 schools offer such courses. “By any measure,” author and physician Larry Dossey observes, “this is a landmark transition in the history of medicine.”

That bold claim is backed by evidence. The health magazine *Prevention* recently published a piece summarizing current research on the connection between spirituality and health. It claimed that more than 300 studies have found that “people of faith are healthier than nonbelievers and less likely to die prematurely from any cause.” This research is being conducted at such institutions as Duke University’s Center for the Study of Religion, Spirituality, and Health and the Maryland-based National Institute for Healthcare Research (NIHR). On its Web site, NIHR publishes a list of faith’s positive effects on people’s physical health, from lower blood pressure and anxiety levels to fewer heart attacks and less depression.

The implications are remarkable. Medical science has assigned to religion a power that most congregations have been reluctant to claim: the power to keep people physically healthy—and even, in some cases, to cure them.

Two key connections between spiritual and physical health seem to be hopefulness and companionship. Consequently, congregations may contribute to health simply by pursuing their missions. But some denominations and religious movements go further. Following are three such examples. The first two are marginal within the broader context of Christianity, but they are growing movements, and their convictions about spirituality and health put them at the forefront of cultural and medical trends. The third is a mainline Protestant congregation that makes no dramatic claims about the connection between physical health and spirituality. But by offering a tool to help people nurture their spiritual lives, it may have a role in helping to sustain them physically, as well.

UNITY NORTH

Unity North, a congregation of about 50 people, meets Sundays at St. Vincent Marten House Hotel. Rev. Bettie Barta, the church’s pastor, founded it three years ago. (Though Unity is frequently confused with the Unitarian-Universalists, there is no connection).

Unity describes itself as dedicated to “the teachings of Jesus and the healing power of prayer.” It is best known for its publication *Daily Word*, a devotional guide with more than 250,000 subscribers. Nationally, there are nearly 1,000 Unity congregations and study groups. The denominational headquarters, called the Unity School of Christianity, is on a 1,400-acre site in suburban Kansas City. Historian Paul Conkin has observed that “in another generation, it may well rank as a major new American religion.” Its place in the city’s religious life is reflected in Rev. Barta’s role as a vice president of the Church Federation.

Unity dates to the late 19th century, when founder Myrtle Fillmore recovered from tuberculosis after visiting a healer. “Medicine and doctors ceased to give me relief, and I was in despair, when I found practical Christianity,” Fillmore wrote of the experience. She claimed to accomplish most of the healing herself: “And here is the key to my discovery. Life has to be guided by intelligence in making all forms. The same law works in my own body. Life is simply a form of energy, and has to be guided and directed in man’s body by his intelligence.”

Though Unity evolved from the same vein of mind-cure therapy as Christian Science, it is separate. Its followers are less resistant to seeking conventional medical care than those in the Church of Christ, Scientist, and Fillmore left no writings similar to Mary Baker Eddy’s *Science and Health*.

Barta describes Unity as a “practical” rather than creedal approach to Christianity. The denomination’s practice involves disciplining the mind to think only positive thoughts and, accordingly, Barta is more like a motivational speaker than a preacher. She isn’t interested in explaining theological points or a doctrinal system; instead, she focuses on the need to eliminate negative thinking and on the health benefits of a positive outlook.

“Jesus understood the potential in everyone and said, ‘Look what can happen if you believe,’ says Barta. “He said, ‘You must believe.’ All through his healings, he never said he had done the healing. He said, ‘Thy belief has made you whole.’ The idea is that your body was created to be well, in a perfect state. It is we who

do things to it—not necessarily outwardly. Sometimes, it’s our inner thinking. We are creators of less-than-wholeness.”

A Unity publication called *Healing* describes a broad connection between faith and healing: “We believe that there is no condition beyond the power of God to heal. When we pray for healing and it does not seem to happen, we do not question God or our faith in God. . . . We hold to the truth that healing has taken place—maybe not the physical healing our hearts have longed for, but healing of another kind, perhaps spiritual healing, healing of a relationship, healing of the understanding.”

CATHOLIC CHARISMATIC RENEWAL

Perhaps no religious movement in America invests more energy in issues of health and healing than Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR).

The movement began in the late 1960s among a group of college students who claimed to experience a “baptism in the Holy Spirit,” or sudden spiritual awakening. Like Pentecostals, Catholic charismatics believe that baptism in the Spirit gives believers the power to exercise certain spiritual gifts—praying in tongues, prophesying, and healing, for example. (These gifts are also called “charisms”—hence the name “charismatics” for people who practice them.)

CCR has expanded rapidly into a grassroots, lay-led movement with an estimated 60 million followers worldwide. The Catholic church’s ambivalence about healing services, noted above, suggests some tension between the Church and its charismatic members. Yet many Church leaders have expressed sympathy with the movement, and its basic legitimacy within the Church is unquestioned. Organizationally, it poses little or no threat, because most charismatics belong to a Catholic parish church; they attend CCR meetings as a supplement to their regular church involvement.

One such group meets in St. Francis Hall at Marian College every Friday, except the first of the month. On that first Friday, the meeting is elsewhere and is entirely dedicated to healing. In the other meetings, a 15- to 20-minute session of healing follows a time of prayer, singing, and teaching.

The chapter that meets at Marian, one of about 60 CCR groups around the state, regularly draws 10 to 20 people. During the healing portion of the meetings, participants cluster in the middle of the room and divide into “prayer teams” of two people. The group’s leader prays over one team member, holding his hand to the person’s forehead. The other team member waits for a “word of knowledge” from God about how to pray for the person, and then joins in praying for the individual. The prayers may be for spiritual or physical healing; CCR emphatically believes in both.

“To be healed spiritually means having an overwhelming sense of peace,” says Len Bielski, leader of the Marian group. “The anxiety is gone, the tension is gone, and there’s an appetite to come back, read scriptures, and amend their lives to be a better person. We believe that the greatest healing is spiritual healing, where people feel a sense of closeness to God and want to change their life. We also believe in physical healing, in relationship healing, psychological healing. All these things come from God.”

CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY

Twice a month, Church of the Nativity (Episcopal) dims the lights in its parish hall, lights candles, plays meditative music, and invites people to walk around barefoot on a reinforced vinyl canvas.

Painted on this canvas, which stretches from wall to wall in the parish hall, is a labyrinth—a circular design modeled after the stone labyrinth constructed at Chartres Cathedral in France 700 years ago. Christians in that era walked the Chartres labyrinth rather than making pilgrimages to Jerusalem. Today, people come to Church of the Nativity’s labyrinth to meditate and to find a sense of peace.

The labyrinth is 36 feet in diameter. Walking at a normal pace, people take 20 to 30 minutes to navigate the twisting inner pathway. There is only one way to walk the path, and thus no danger of becoming confused or encountering dead-ends. The path leads to the center, which is decorated with petals, and then back by

the same path, in reverse.

Nativity has offered its labyrinth since 1995. It is one of many congregations and retreat centers that have initiated the recent resurgence of this ancient tradition. Over the past decade, in fact, the movement has grown so that there is now an Indiana Labyrinth Coalition of about 10 organizations with Chartres-style labyrinths.

In addition to religious organizations, hospitals and nursing homes nationwide have begun offering labyrinths to help patients and their families find peace and healing. This adaptation of an old religious practice is a prime example of combining spirituality with medical practice. Walking a labyrinth, people center themselves literally: they end up at the center of the design. This act can help some people center themselves spiritually, and the medical community increasingly assigns value to that role.

John Ridder, who helped create Nativity's labyrinth, describes walking the labyrinth as a form of prayer. "This type of prayer involves all three stages of being—body, mind, and spirit," he says. "Your body is walking; your mind is trying to figure out the design and how to keep you on the path; and your spirit is directing you to continue to the center. All three states of being are involved, and it's a deeper, more contemplative type of prayer than you have in church on Sunday morning."

The labyrinth, which is easily folded and stored, serves as a form of outreach: Nativity occasionally takes it "on the road" to other congregations or retreat centers on request. Alternatively, church groups occasionally travel to Nativity to walk it together.

"We thought this would be useful to the church and the community," says Elizabeth Mattice, chairwoman of Nativity's labyrinth committee. "My hope is that those who experience it will leave for a while that hectic life we all have, and have time to be in tune with God."

These three examples differ in many ways, but they have common threads. Each is a relatively young movement, and each views itself as reclaiming an ancient practice or teaching. Together, they also might help shape the future of Christianity. At the least, they suggest that the connection between faith and healing cannot be ignored.

But the issue is not restricted to one faith. Many Jewish congregations have reconnected with their roots by offering healing services. These involve no expectation of a divine, instantaneous healing. Rather, they emphasize the interconnectedness of humanity and guide people toward a healing of the spirit.

"Ultimately, Judaism connects us to something beyond ourselves," says Rabbi Sandy Sasso of Congregation Beth-El Zedeck in a recent healing service at that congregation. "We are more than this finite presence, limited by time and space, more than our mortal selves. We are part of an eternal faith and eternal people. . . . The angel of hope, faith, and praise flies in the face of despair and heals us."

At Beth-El Zedeck, part of one service each month is set aside as a time of healing, when people can request prayer for the ill and talk publicly about the healing that they have received. Additionally, the congregation has a special healing service every year on the afternoon of Yom Kippur. When it began three years ago, it was unclear whether anyone would attend. The response was so strong that it became an annual event.

Despite this success and that of similar services at local Episcopalian churches, there are potential complications that congregations should note. Healing has a long history within every major world religion. Eastern religions, particularly Buddhism and Hinduism, are influential in the fields of alternative medicine and therapy. Conflicts can arise when healing practices and programs bring different religious traditions into unwelcome contact.

A recent clash between Christianity and Reiki provides a good example. Reiki is an ancient Buddhist healing tradition whose practitioners use their hands to manipulate an unseen "life-force energy." They claim to direct this healing energy to the affected part of an ill person's body. Some Christian congregations, such as Unity North, freely allow and encourage Reiki practitioners to teach and demonstrate it. But others take the position of the Church of England, which recently warned Christians away from Reiki—along with yoga

—because “the source of the energy is not clearly defined” in these practices, and they “may be likely to distract from or undermine a person’s faith in Christ.”

Even a labyrinth, which clearly has an important place in Christian history, can be a source of division. “We have one person who will not walk it, who thinks it’s from the dark side of religion,” says Church of the Nativity’s Elizabeth Mattice. “There will always be some people who are scared of it. You are going to have a few, probably, that believe it’s the work of the devil.”

Nonetheless, the recent medical and media attention invested in the connection between spirituality and health has muted some of this skepticism. Rev. Sue Reid of St. Alban’s Episcopal Church said that the opposition to healing services among Episcopalians “is fading pretty dramatically.” Her church offers two healing services on Wednesday mornings; additionally, the Sunday worship service is a dedicated healing service five or six times each year. “Our attitude has shifted, particularly our awareness of how prayer has a role in healing,” says Reid.

“People are becoming more aware of the divine and their need to be reconnected,” says Ridder, who has not personally encountered opposition to the labyrinth. His job as a facilitator involves giving people who request it a brief talk about the design, and then directing them to a space for writing or meditating after they walk it. “I don’t know whether there’s a connection between the labyrinth and healing,” he says, “but I’ve seen very agitated people walk in and come out at peace. What I attribute that to, I don’t know. But the fact is, they came out at peace.”

POINTS TO REMEMBER:

- Ideas about healing vary widely across traditions. Some think of it as a physical healing brought on by supernatural intervention, but most think of it as the restoration of peace and spiritual wholeness.
- Recent medical studies have blurred the distinction between spiritual and physical health, indicating that the former directly influences the latter.
- Relatively new and growing movements within Christianity have flourished by making the connection between spirituality and health central to their theology, while established denominations have recovered old traditions that help people find peace and healing.
- The burgeoning emphasis on health and healing is not limited to Christian congregations. Numerous synagogues have recently instituted healing services that emphasize the healing wisdom of the Jewish tradition.
- Healing plays an important role in many faith traditions; the variety of ideas and practices can cause conflict when one tradition borrows from another.

CONTACTS & RESOURCES:

Congregations

Congregation Beth-El Zedeck
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Catholic Charismatic Renewal—Central Indiana
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Indianapolis, IN 46206-0821
(317) 592-1992

Church of the Nativity (Episcopal)
7300 Lantern Rd.

Indianapolis, IN 46256
(317) 849-3656

St. Alban's Episcopal Church
4601 N. Emerson Ave.
Indianapolis, IN 46226
(317) 546-8037

Unity North
P.O. Box 40725
Indianapolis, IN 46240
(317) 570-1221
www.unitynorthindy.org

Unity School of Christianity
1901 NW Blue Parkway
Unity Village, MO 64065-0001
www.unityworldhq.org

Books and articles

The list of popular and scholarly publications exploring some aspect of spirituality and health is long and rapidly growing. The following list is only suggestive, not exhaustive. Pieces related to Jewish healing include Marcelo Bronstein, "Healing: a Jewish word, *Tikkun*, March-April 1999; Nancy Flam, "Healing the spirit: a Jewish approach," *Cross Currents*, Winter 1996/97; Estelle Frankel, "Repentance, psychotherapy, and healing through a Jewish lens," *American Behavioral Scientist*, March 1998; and Christopher Singer, "Many turn to Jewish mysticism for spiritual growth," *Detroit News*, January 2, 1999.

For useful explorations of Christian thinking on this subject, see Morton Kelsey, *Healing and Christianity* (Augsburg, 1995); and Part VII of John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998). Also, Paul Conkin's *American Originals* (University of North Carolina, 1997) has a chapter on the origins and practices of the Church of Christ, Scientist, and the Unity movement.

For more general treatments of spirituality and healing, see Gregg Easterbrook, "Faith healers," *The New Republic*, July 19, 1999; David Elkins, "Spirituality: It's what's missing in mental health," *Psychology Today*, September 1999; Harold Koenig, "Religion, spirituality, and medicine: application to clinical practice," *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, October 4, 2000; and Ellen Michaud, "Do you have the miracle healer in you?" *Prevention*, December 1998. For more skeptical viewpoints, see Arnold S. Relman, "Andrew Weil, the boom in alternative medicine, and the retreat from science," *The New Republic*, December 14, 1998; and David Schafer, "Prayer and healing at St. Luke's," *The Humanist*, January 2000.

Internet

The National Institute for Healthcare Research is the best on-line resource for recent findings about the relationship between spirituality and health. Its Web address is www.nihr.org.

The PAXworks site, www.paxworks.com/homepage.html, has a wide range of information about labyrinths, including photos, suggested reading, and links to other relevant sites.

Other

Two resources deserve special note. The magazine *Spirituality and Health* is published by Trinity Church, New York, with the cooperation of "leading theologians, philosophers, and researchers from diverse disciplines." Information about the magazine and an electronic archive of articles are available on its Web site: www.spiritualityhealth.com. Also, the Chicago-based Park Ridge Center "explores and enhances the interaction of health, faith, and ethics through research, education, and consultation." Articles from the Center's bimonthly *Bulletin* are posted on its Web site, www.prchfe.org. In general, Park Ridge is an important clearinghouse

offering expertise and information relevant to many aspects of this subject.

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