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Health and wholeness

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Introduction: Health and Wholeness Conference 1990

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It was appropriate that First Lutheran Church of Vancouver should sponsor the first Health and Wholeness Conference in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. The congregation had been exploring the area of health and wholeness for the past ten years. As the congregation moved into this area, it was my task to provide the theological leadership. In this way, the congregation's journey became my own journey. My theology became more inclusive while becoming also more focussed as it incorporated past personal thoughts and experiences.

While teaching at the Lutheran pre-seminary school in Zululand, I was introduced to a particularly interesting aspect of Zulu thought. A missionary who had grown up among the Zulus informed me that there were no words for fractions in the Zulu language. African thought had no place for an examination of the parts outside of the whole. A half an orange has no existence of its own. It has existence only as part of a whole orange. At the time this sounded interesting, but not particularly relevant. This philosophical position was elaborated by further reading in Bantu philosophy.¹

My move towards a holistic theology gained impetus when I was reintroduced to a fellow South African, General Jan C. Smuts. As a child I remember my parents and other adults discussing his crazy ideas but never heard anyone expound on these ideas. During the past fifteen years he has been referred to as the "father" of the modern holistic movement. He is also the one who coined the term "holism". Unfortunately very few people have read his book *Holism and Evolution*, one reason being that it has been out of print since the nineteen thirties. Recently, however, it was reprinted in South Africa.² In *Holism*

and Evolution Smuts presents holism as the dynamic and unifying principle within the whole universe. He is also concerned that the process of holism be understood as the whole being more than just the sum of the parts.

It was in the church that I saw both the move towards, as well as the rejection of, holistic theology. In its "world mission" the church realized that establishing clones of North American parish ministries was not only inappropriate but also ineffective. Mission is the function of a variety of professionals and not just of the pastor. Here is a basis of a holistic ministry. Unfortunately as the church moved towards a holistic understanding in practice, it failed to do so in theory and theology. North America parish ministry has traditionally focussed on pastoral leadership; consequently a very narrow definition is given to the meaning of the ministry of Word and Sacraments. When the ministry of Jesus is studied, as well as the ministry to which Jesus called the church, a different picture of ministry takes shape. Ministry is revealed as holistic both in theory and practice.

Serving First Lutheran Church helped shape my understanding of ministry as holistic. As requests were made for "healing" services, the meaning and purpose of the ministry of healing were examined. A distinction was made between healing and curing.³ Healing was found to be all-encompassing, holistic. Curing is essentially concerned with the parts and not so much with the whole even though it has profound implications for the whole. It could be a part of healing, but not necessary for healing. The patient may die because there is no cure, but that does not mean that the patient was not healed. As the members of First Lutheran Church explored the meaning of healing, it became an essential part of the congregation's identity and mission.⁴ The old boundaries of ministry were extended. The ministry of Word and Sacrament was greatly enriched. Out of this new understanding came the Parish Care Centre and the monthly use of the service of anointing found in the *Occasional Services* book.

The centennial celebrations of First Lutheran Church provided an opportunity for the congregation to invite interested others to explore with them the nature and significance of a holistic theology. To facilitate the process, papers were requested that would explore the concept from a biblical and

cultural perspective. These papers focussed on health and wholeness in the Old Testament, the New Testament, in the church's life and practise, and in family life. Since Vancouver is a multi-cultural community, papers were also requested that explored health and wholeness from both the Chinese and Indian perspective. Most of these papers are now being made available to the whole church. I am deeply appreciative of the willingness and enthusiasm of the following writers who devoted their time and effort to this conference: Dr. Roger Uitti, Dr. Erwin Buck, Dr. Michael Poellet, Dr. Wilburn Nelson and Pastor Yuk Kiong Chong. Dr. Roland Miller and the Wheat Ridge Foundation have granted their permission for the reprinting of his article "Christ the Healer".⁵ Thank you to the Lutheran Life Insurance Society of Canada which made a generous grant to the conference and to all the participants who made the conference a stimulating experience.

Notes

- ¹ Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1959).
- ² Jan C. Smuts, *Holism and Evolution* (Cape Town: N & S Press, 1987).
- ³ Michael Nel, "Cured or Healed," *The Shepherd*, 61/3 (March 1985) 21 and 23.
- ⁴ In 1984 the following Identity and Mission statements were adopted by First Lutheran Church:

Identity Statement

By the grace of God we are a community, diverse in gifts, called and healed by the Spirit through Word and Sacrament for faithful service to Jesus the Christ.

Mission Statement

Out of our identity as God's people, we seek to bring about wholeness for our members, our neighbourhood, and our world, by establishing ministries of caring and healing which develop and use our individual and communal gifts.

- ⁵ Roland E. Miller, "Christ the Healer," *Health and Healing: Ministry of the Church* (Chicago: Wheat Ridge Foundation, 1980) 15-40.