

HEALING MINISTRY AS A CONGREGATION

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What does it mean to have a ministry of healing, for a congregation? Let's go back to the origin of the word 'health'. The -th ending means 'that which has the quality or character of'. 'Health' comes from tacking that ending onto Old English *hál* (whole, hale). Thus, 'health' and 'holistic' are both about 'wholeness'. That's a spiritual thing and not just a physical one; for if your soul is sick, what good is your perishable body's wholeness going to do you -- except perhaps to give you a little more time in which to heal your soul and get right with God? Health involves all aspects of physical life, when you are well as well as when you are ill. So a congregation which believes itself to be called to a 'healing ministry' needs to think about what that really means. There are many ways for a congregation to have a ministry of healing. Few congregations have the size or the intensity of mission to do all of them, but any congregation can do *some* of them.

How can a congregation develop a ministry of healing? Some ideas (among many):

- By prayer chains and intercessory prayer cells, which keep the ill in prayer for as long as is needed;
- By the laying on of hands, or anointing of the sick with oil by elders, deacons, and others who are commissioned or ordained. Especially during worship while others are communing, as part of the congregational prayers, or quietly after the service;
- By visitation teams that give comfort and joy to those in supervised medical settings like nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and hospices;
- By prayers during worship, and prayer-oriented special worship services for healing;
- By holding the simple conviction that God answers prayer;
- Through the Spirit's gifts of healing, given in grace by the Holy Spirit as needed;
- By individual and group confession and absolution, key steps towards inner healing;
- Through support of health services, such as hospices, social services centers, counseling services, domestic abuse shelters, and clinics for the uninsured;
- Through encouragement of preventive health care through exercise, education in first aid, Heimlich, and CPR, and sign-ups for blood and organ donation;
- Through the promotion of good personal health practices, such as eating good foods in moderation, keeping clean, and discouragement of smoking and alcohol abuse;
- Through choosing a qualified local Christian as the parish nurse, who has the task of teaching about health, spreading word about available health services, and making basic preventive care freely available in the congregation and neighborhood;
- By creating an atmosphere where joy, laughter, and fitting celebration are a part of healthy normal living;
- Through Eucharistic ministers and other trained helpers;
- By being home to support groups such as AA, Al-Anon, and Overeaters Anonymous;
- By being home to fellowship groups for nurses, doctors, EMTs, and such; and to create drop-boxes, email boxes or message boards for them as a place where they can freely ask for prayer;
- By supporting or setting up day care for working moms, or relief care services for those who are taking care of those with long-term illness at home.

This list from an internet site is pretty exhaustive, but many churches are doing many or most of these activities. Across the Greater Milwaukee Synod, we can say we're in there DOING almost all of the items on the list. We can legitimately claim to have an active ministry of healing in this place, for which we praise God.

The action of faithful believers really counts. Think of the paralytic being lowered through the roof by his friends so they could bypass the crowds and get him to Jesus (Mark 2:1-13). Jesus marveled at *their* faith and *their* determination for their friend. Disease can make faith and hope harder to come by. The struggle is hard and can challenge a person's soul. When that happens, ill ones depend on the faith of other faithful people to pull them through. That's the job of a healing ministry in a concerned congregation, and is what we are about as we strive to nurture faith and spiritual growth among our members and in the community around us.