

Healing – an essential dimension of the church' mission

A contribution of the WCC-DIFAEM Study Group on Mission and Healing

In 2005, the world mission conference in Athens, Greece, considered the theme, "Come Holy Spirit, Heal and Reconcile: Called in Christ to be Reconciling and Healing Communities," and strongly reaffirmed the healing mission of the church.

In 2007, the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the German Institute for Medical Mission (DIFAEM) jointly called for a "study group on mission and healing" which was given the mandate to follow up the Athens conference. This group prepared a publication towards the transversal theme "healing and reconciliation". This booklet is entitled "Witnessing to Christ today. Promoting health and healing for all", and it is based on the rich ecumenical discussions on health, healing and wholeness of the WCC's Christian Medical Commission (CMC).

What I will briefly share with you is an answer to the question about the Christian understanding of health and healing, and some thoughts on the importance of the healing discourse in mission theology today.

What is health? What is healing?

The basis of the healing mission of the church is a Christian understanding of health and healing. In the 1970s and 1980s the CMC conducted a worldwide study process on the Christian understanding of health, healing and wholeness. This process resulted in insights on the healing mission of the church which till today provide a solid foundation of the Christian healing ministry.

The main insights of these discussions were that health is not merely the absence of disease, and that, the causes of diseases are not merely parasites or bacteria but have social,

economic, political, ecological and spiritual reasons. Health is often an issue of justice, peace, integrity of creation, and of spirituality.¹

These insights led the CMC to offer in 1989 the following definition of health:

Health is a dynamic state of well-being of the individual and society, of physical, mental, spiritual, economic, political, and social well-being – of being in harmony with each other, with the material environment and with
²
God.

According to this broad definition, health is related to the individual and to society. Health is not a static concept, but a “dynamic state” which is influenced by various factors. It is emphasized that alongside social, medical and economic factors, one’s relationship to God is also a vital category.

The CMC definition of health is to be understood as providing a concept of wholeness that reflects the biblical vision of shalom viz. salvation, which characterises the kingdom of God. Therefore, we understand wholeness not as a static balance of harmony but as living-in-community with God, people, and creation. Individualism and injustice are frequent barriers to community building, and therefore to health. In this understanding of wholeness, all dimensions of life are included.

Such a comprehensive understanding of health has consequences for an understanding of healing and of the church's healing ministry. Healing in this sense means restoring broken relationships – relationships of people with themselves, with their fellow human beings, with creation, and with God. This is exactly what Jesus practised on earth and this is what Jesus wanted his disciples to practise when he sent them out with the ministry to heal.³

Therefore the healing ministry of the churches comprises much more than healing of physical ailments. Alongside the practice of medicine, practical caring, psychotherapy and

¹ World Council of Churches: Healing and Wholeness. The Churches’ Role in Health, The report of a study by the Christian Medical Commission, Geneva 1990, p. 1

² The WCC approved this definition and published it in, Healing and Wholeness, 1990, p.6.

³ Cf. Mt 10:1-7; Mk 6:7-13; Lk 9:1-6

counselling, the Christian duty to care for the sick also includes caring for spiritual needs, as well as working for justice and peace. Such diverse activities are all part of God's work in creation, his plan of salvation and God's presence in the church.

Such a comprehensive understanding of health and healing has important consequences in terms of the agents of the healing ministry. Healing then is not only a medical issue, but the healing ministry belongs to all Christians and it especially belongs to the Christian community. A community practices its healing ministry by, e.g., praying and caring for the sick, using creative healing liturgies, learning to take personal responsibility for health, advocating for justice and integrity of creation.⁴

In its publication, the study group on mission and healing collected a number of case studies that are examples of healing communities.

Healing – a new paradigm in mission theology

Let me conclude with a few thoughts related to the question why the healing discourse has become so important for the church today. You might argue that working towards the realization of God's Kingdom through working for the liberation of the poor, for justice and peace, was considered as vital to the church's mission since a long time. You are absolutely right, and I think that the introduction of "healing" into mission theology is more a change in terminology than in the issues considered as belonging to the church's mission.

To use the expression of "healing" provides a perspective that – in addition to corporate or societal experiences of suffering – covers individual experiences of suffering. "Healing" addresses the individual as well as society. In particular, "healing" addresses all those people of today who are longing for health, wholeness and for meaning of their lives. They are many and it is most important that the churches turn to them and provide assistance and answers to their needs.

⁴ Cf. Healing and Wholeness, 1990, p 31f

The turn towards acknowledging the role of subjectivity is characteristic in the so called post modern times and the churches can't neglect this development. At the same time, however, we have to realize and to emphasize that the church's healing ministry goes beyond individual healing and that it calls for the healing of the world.⁵

⁵ To this cf. Vebjorn Horsfjord: Healing and salvation in late modernity: The use and implications of such terms in the ecumenical movement, in: IRM 96 (Nos. 380/381 January/April 2007, pp. 5-21