

A METHODIST STATEMENT ON

THE CHURCH AND THE MINISTRY OF HEALING

Adopted by the Methodist Conference of 1977

Introduction

1. The huge scale of human suffering is a major obstacle to Christian belief. How can a good and loving God permit such meaningless, haphazard pain and tragedy? So Christian apologetics indicated how God is at work to bear pain, heal sickness and infirmity, create wholeness, transform agonising situations into the creative ones, and to see death as both a terminus and a transition.
2. There is a widespread interest in the development of new medical techniques and facilities, linked to confidence that disease may ultimately be curable. This interest spreads into areas on the edges of orthodox medicine, producing a fascination in all systems claiming 'healing', and often encouraging extreme and illusory expectations.
3. Christians must squarely face the fact of death and, far from trivialising or ignoring it, must demonstrate that the resurrection of Jesus proclaims a victory over death which enables mankind to accept its inevitability as part of God's triumphant plan.

Theological affirmations

4. The Christian approach to health and healing is based on convictions about the nature of man, the significance of Jesus and the continuing work of the Holy Spirit.
5. Christians believe that this is God's world, brought into being by his Word, and sustained by his Spirit. His will is that all his creation should find the harmony for which it is designed: harmony between the many aspects of the human person (physical, mental, spiritual), between man and his fellows and his communities, between man and the natural order, and between man and the source of all value and being, God the Father.
6. Yet creation is subject to disharmonies which pose deep problems to the faith of Christians – and not least those tragedies (e.g. earthquakes, typhoons and droughts) for which man is not responsible, though he must care for their victims and seek to minimise their effects. Christian attention should also turn to those disharmonies for which man is responsible because they are the inevitable results of his envy, hatred, violence and greed.

7. Jesus is the love of God incarnate. His ministry includes both demonstration and proclamation that the forces of evil are overcome, the Kingdom of God let loose among men. By what he was and by what he did – supremely by his cross and resurrection – Jesus made available a new power by which the sick are healed, the lost are given purpose again, sinners find forgiveness and new life. The ministry is described in many ways – as the Mighty One casting out devils, as the prelude to the Son of Man coming into his glory, as the Messiah ushering in the New Age. All these interpretations strive to express the same fundamental wonder – that in Jesus a wholly right man is manifested, and that he helps others to find that wholeness. The resurrection event demonstrates that God's loving power in Jesus transcends death and is neither thwarted by it nor by the powers of evil.
8. It is God's will that ultimately all his children should experience the wholeness seen in Jesus. Health is a state of wholeness. It is marked by the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual integration of individuals both within themselves and in relation to their environment. There is a rich comprehensive word for this in the bible: salvation, which is not a purely individual phenomenon. It implies the rediscovery of that essential harmony for which God made us. As sin involved the disruption not only of the individual personality, but also of man's relationships, so too salvation involves the restoration of wholeness of individuals and of communities.
9. Every human is unique, with a personality, powers and gifts that nobody else possesses in the same way. Nevertheless everyone lives within a complex of limitations – born in a particular time and place, with a physical and emotional make-up largely formed before birth and during infancy. But within each person there are forces working for wholeness, for self-affirmation and self-giving, for trust in God, for love for God and man – for salvation. In part these forces derive from the self-fulfilling purposes of the Creation. In part they are the result of the immanent activity of the Spirit throughout the world. Within the life of the individual, the Spirit reinforces human resilience and, in harmony with man's healing skills, provides emotional and spiritual resources which are intimately involved with the physical healing process. Salvation thus includes a dynamic for healing, seeking to remove bodily, emotional and spiritual illness and to achieve that perfection which is God's intention.
10. Ageing and death are natural functions within the whole scheme of creation. Every person dies and makes way for others. This process is another aspect of that whereby new life is always arising. Physical death is not essentially an enemy, but a stage through which all must pass before entering that further one indicated by the word 'resurrection'. However, 'death' has other overtones in the biblical witness. It is also a sign of our frailty, rebellion, lostness, estrangement from God: it again hints at the mysteriousness of human existence and the ever present threat of sin.
11. The Church is the community in which the Holy Spirit is sought and experienced. Here he is known in his forgiving, renewing, healing powers, both for individuals and communities. But the grace and energy of the Holy

Spirit and all his saving powers are not confined to the Church and to Christian believers but are active everywhere, even if not recognised.

12. God through the Holy Spirit enables men to face the truth about mortal existence and to find the resources to make life a creative, trusting relationship with him. Moreover, he promotes man's quest for the meaning of the natural order and his responsibility in relation to it. The development of the scientific method is a fruit of his activity. There is always danger associated with scientific and other human enterprise – that persons may be regarded as but superior animals: that life may be regarded as cheap and expendable: that the individual may be studied in isolation from his fellows: that death may be regarded as the final enemy: that the spiritual dimension to existence may be ignored or explained away. Nevertheless Christians affirm that enterprise thankfully, whilst guarding against those dangers by setting it within the context of belief in God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Some consequences for the individual

13. Every person, despite his or her limitations, is intended by God to experience salvation as seen in Jesus Christ. There is therefore no place for fatalism. No person is ever 'hopeless'.
14. The symptoms of man's disease are not all physical. They include guilt, isolation, alienation, lack of love, despair, the breakdown of relationships and, particularly, fear. The potential destructiveness of these elements cannot be overcome by merely physical remedies. Nor can man's need be met unless there is a readiness to face the realities of life. For that reason – and also because of the relevance of wholeness to health – many forms of healing ministry are needed. Not least among these is the skilled and compassionate help the Church can offer.
15. Some suffering is precipitated by events of the natural order, but Christians believe that God wills us to face these crises by faith in him. Instead of being destroyed by bitterness and self pity, the Christian seeks the resources of the Spirit both to meet immediate need, and also to fulfil opportunities of service in the very face of tragedy. Most suffering, however, results directly or indirectly from the sin and ignorance of humanity. This is seen in the deliberate mishandling of God's world, in the neglect of the needs of fellow men and women, and even in suspicion and hatred of other humans.
16. It is both natural and Christian to struggle against disease and all that upsets the balance of our lives. To that end, every legitimate means may be used, for medicine and its techniques are part of God's gracious provision. Sometimes every possible medical means of healing has been practiced to no effect. There is then need to achieve a subtle balance between two hopes – that God will heal, and that he will give strength to rise above that condition if healing does not happen. Here 'salvation' is being able to live by that subtle balance, whilst knowing that nothing need separate us from the love which is made plain in Jesus Christ. It is, therefore, important to distinguish 'cure' from 'healing'. In terms of wholeness and maturity there can be forms of helping

which are not cures in the popular sense of that term. There are many situations in which the understanding of suffering can lead to a degree of spiritual growth which is recognisable as a significant achievement of healing.

17. Always, then, Christians should put themselves trustingly into God's care, for they do not live by sight with totally satisfying explanations for every experience. They live by faith in God whose love and capacity to bear suffering is shown in Jesus.

Some consequences for the church

18. The Church is called to be a community in which the constant, total healing work of the Holy Spirit is taught, sought and experienced. The Spirit of healing is present in worship, sacraments, preaching, prayer, fellowship and pastoral and social ministry of the Church. This is its normal activity and all its members are called to be involved in it.
19. Because God is the source of all good and all salvation, the Church expects to work in partnership with all agencies promoting psychological, physical or spiritual health for individuals or communities. But it is not an uncritical partnership, since healing is incomplete without the dimension of fellowship with God which the Church must offer. Further, the Church is called to be that community in which death is considered honestly and within the framework of the complete Christian hope.
20. There are individuals who possess special insight, knowledge, faith and power which enable them to exercise distinctive healing ministries. Other individuals may received a particular gift of healing from God for a specific occasion. All these gifts should be carefully examined by the Church to ensure that they do not denigrate into spiritual or emotional manipulation of the sufferer. It is also important to stress that Christ the Healer is constantly present in the sympathy and understanding of all his people. Every member of the Church is part of a community which by its nature and its activities seeks to create wholeness, health and healing.
21. The healing work of the Church may be focused in particular services which emphasise the healing ministry, though these should be regarded as illustrating the constant nature of the Church rather than as being an eccentric and occasional activity. Indeed, the Church must discover ways in which its resources of premises and personnel may be more fully deployed in the ministry of healing.
22. The Church must be fully aware of the importance of preventative medicine and encourage a life style which is conducive to health. Personal hygiene and abstinence from self-indulgence (not least in the use of destructive drugs) are aspects of this style.
23. The Spirit also prompts us to challenge the social sins which create human misery. Economic, political, cultural, environmental and industrial structures deeply influence the health and wellbeing of individuals, and concern for

health and healing therefore must go beyond individual to social policies aimed at neighbourhoods, communities and whole populations. To pastoral concern, therefore, there needs to be added the prophetic attitude, which attempts to discover, to proclaim and to make real the new patterns of humanity and of human society into which God calls us. Here as elsewhere, the healer needs to recognise his own need of healing: Christians and Churches need themselves to be set free from the constraints imposed by our society with its sickness and death, in order that they may become pointers towards the new kingdom which God is continually creating in our midst.

24. Within the normal life of the Church there should be constant training in counselling, caring for the weak and distressed, responding to community needs and the cause of the deprived. Such acts of compassion need constant reflection and prayer for their proper direction. Thus the Church becomes a praying, healing, caring community. In all this the major motive must be love for God and the persons he had made. Since healing is a constant process rather than an achieved state, a caring relationship never ends, but remains responsive to new development. The Church is the community called to that regular caring in which hope is never lost.