

# WHOLE PERSON HEALING – Affirming God’s Image

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We have come together as medical and dental professionals, students and allied workers, representing several continents, islands, ethnic and language groups, cultures, socio-economic conditions and denominations all over our planet. We gather together in this international congress in Sydney to affirm our unity amidst all this diversity. This we do in our joint commitment to the healing profession and our belief that our work is grounded in the Good News of God’s healing in Christ. We have come together to listen to and learn from one another and to seek from the wisdom and will of God His revelation regarding issues that have a global appeal and relevance to health workers.

In such a time as this, our viability on this fragile planet is only going to be maintained by a worldview that will hold our diverse humanity together. I believe that *the most unifying worldview will be a collective inclusive perspective which maintains that all human beings are equal because every human being possesses inherent dignity and worth. This dignity and worth gives every person a right to provisions for the best quality of life.* It is a collective and inclusive view of ourselves which is grounded in this understanding of being human that can best hold humanity together on this planet. This is the basis for the unity of Christian health care professionals. We must guard it with our lives or neglect it to our common peril!

What is required for this unifying worldview to be valid? *A respect for the equality, dignity and worth of every individual around the world is ultimately determined by a global consensus of what defines persons as “human” beings.* For Christians, it is our understanding that *to be human means that all persons are created in God’s image.* . This understanding of the nature of human beings is derived from the Doctrine of or humankind as revealed to us in the Bible.

### **THE MEANING: The biblical basis for our humanity - created in the image of God**

What does it mean to be created in God’s image which gives us human dignity and worth? In Genesis 1:27, we read “So God created human beings, making them to be like himself” Like God, therefore, the human being is a *self or personality that is autonomous or possessing freedom of will.* This self also possesses *mental, relational and spiritual capacities.* These capacities are given for the *purpose of ordering human society and to exercise authority, responsibility, and care over nature **for the good of all.*** Moreover, God “blessed them and said, “Have many children, so that your descendants will live all over the earth and bring it under their control. I am putting you in charge.” ...(Genesis 1:28, TEV)

How do these capacities of self in God’s image operate? Our **mental capacity** is the ability to *choose based on reason* and to be *creative.* Our **relational capacity** enables us to be *moral,* or ‘other-regarding,’ and to live in community by showing unconditional self-giving *love.* Our **spiritual capacity** is our ability, as non-material self, to *transcend* our physical suffering and environmental circumstances during life and to *survive even physical death* so that “this mortal can take on immortality”. Thus we could be described as **‘creative, loving and transcendent**

**beings'**. These capacities or potentials confer on every, single human being a unique dignity and worth from which comes our authority to have dominion over all the earth and our responsibility to care for each other and the environment over which we have dominion. All our human capacities, therefore, reflect the very image and nature of God himself. Thus the Bible speaks of the *mind* of God (Romans 11:34), His *righteousness* and *love* (Psalm 145:17) and the fact that He is "*Spirit*" (John 4:24).

To be "human" therefore means to be "made in the image of God". This is the inclusive perspective that will see us placing a high premium on the sanctity of human life and respecting the inherent value, worth and dignity of every person here on earth, regardless of colour, class or creed.

### **The eclipse of the meaning of being "human"**

On our planet there has been an increasing *disregard or undermining of what the true meaning of being "human" due to the systematic suppression or denial of the Biblical understanding of "Gods image"*. The systems of modern global society have invented their own understandings which have come to eclipse or overshadow this Biblical understanding.

In the West and in countries influenced by the West there is the *secular idea of Material Determinism*. Here, *what it means to be human is that we are completely shaped and conditioned by measurable material reality*.

In all societies of the world, but more so in non-western countries, there is the ever present tendency for a *blind collectivism* in the areas of religion, politics and culture, at the expense of respecting individual circumstances and freedom of choice. This blind collectivism has led to a philosophy that that can be termed *Social Determinism*. According to this *the only phenomena*

*that are acceptable are those that can be sanctioned according to the traditions of the collective.*

Thus what it means to be human is to be completely shaped and conditioned by social reality.

This has become another alternative to understanding the individual as created in the image of God.

Thus according to these two philosophies of *Material Determinism and Social Determinism*, what it means to be human is that we are completely dependent on and absolutely shaped by material and social realities rather than being created in God's image and thus having the capacities to shape and transcend these realities..

### **THE MARRING: the crisis of dehumanization**

These two philosophies which have led to the eclipsing of the true meaning of being human have thus given licence to *a crisis of dehumanisation* all over the world. Here, many persons are disenfranchised of their dignity and worth, and thus of their autonomy, authority and responsibility to exercise their capacities. To dehumanize others and ourselves is to mar or deface the very image of God in us. In other words, to deny that we and all others are made equally to be creative, loving and transcendent beings is to destructively undermine our potential to live out this reality.

What are some examples of the influence of this destructive dehumanization? *The material determinism of hedonism*, or living for pleasure only, leads to dehumanization by unhealthy lifestyles. Consequently there are the avoidable epidemics of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases related to unhealthy sexuality, prostitution and pornography. There are the chronic non- communicable diseases related to fast food, smoking and alcohol. *The material*

*determinism of economics* sees one's significance determined solely by the market, or what sells. The unequal system of trade imbalances that results contributes to HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, which are largely diseases of poverty. The commercialization of medical services leads to unequally distributed health care. There is the market driven misuse of the environment leading to global warming. Public health measures to combat avian influenza are neglected because they have little market value. The economics of the market contributes to modern slavery as well as in the oppression of corruption, the drug cartels, and the arms trade, which all fuel violence.

Due to the *material determinism of "the person as biology"*, individuals have become dehumanized by a practice of medicine which is dominated by a glorification of technology to the detriment of humaneness and ethics in health care.

*The social determinism of racism and the other myths of ethnic and cultural superiority* have led to the marring of God's image among persons, through the dehumanization of oppression and genocide. The persecutory *social determinism of tyrannical religion* has also been at the root of mass conflict, religious persecution and denial of human rights. *The social determinism of politics* sees the right to health and development as deserved only by persons being loyal to who can best manipulate power to serve economic or collectivist interests. All these types of social determinism of tyrannical cultural, religious and political systems foster the cruelty of marginalization through stigma and discrimination of the physically disabled, mentally ill and the victims of HIV/AIDS, rape and domestic violence.

These forms of material and social determinism create dehumanized persons who are mere pawns of economic and social systems. Unfortunately too many persons who are oppressed have become vulnerable because they, as well as their oppressors, have bought into these deceptive philosophies and make themselves into pawns.

All this marring of God's image through these destructive dehumanising practices threatens to bring our fragile planet into an untimely chaos by undermining that inclusive view that can hold us together – the view that we are all equal and possess dignity and worth because we are human, or made in the image of God.

### **OUR MINISTRY: affirming the image of God**

This marring creates an urgent need for a radical rediscovery or greater advocacy of what it ought to mean to be human. Where do we start? Our heightened awareness of the extent of this world's neglect of this image of God and the resultant marring by dehumanization should lead us to a passion to affirm this image.

As we seek this affirming of all persons as potentially creative, loving and transcendent beings there is a twin perspective to God's image in us that we need to understand, as health care professionals. Firstly, God's image which is reflected in us is *multidimensional in nature* – in the sense of His possessing mind, being relational and being spiritual. Secondly, *each aspect is interconnected* to each other in such a way as to enable a unified whole in God. Thus *to refer to our being made in God's image is really to speak of our being created as multidimensional persons having several integrated capacities. These together enable our unified wholeness.*

*Therefore they need to be affirmed and utilized.* We will become better equipped as healthcare professionals when we take this twin perspective and choose to minister to persons in order to enable their wholeness by paying attention to the presence and interconnectedness of all their multidimensional capacities.

Western health care, which is now practiced globally, has been guilty of an *either/or* or “*compartmentalized*” paradigm of the person. This is due to the erroneous philosophy of “Cartesian dualism” which states that mind and body operate completely separately. This has opened the door to material determinism. Here with a one-sided focus on the body healthy care professionals too often view the person as machine instead of being in God’s image. This approach leads to a “*patchwork medicine*” attending to “*machine parts*” rather than to the healing of whole persons. *This paradigm has also paved the way for a dehumanizing “patchwork approach” to human development in general* where the body is left to the doctor, the mind to the psychologist, the soul to the pastor and one’s socio-economic welfare is left to the politician!

We are challenged as Christian health workers to break out of the compartmentalized or “either/or” modes of thinking to adopt an *integrated “both/and” or whole person paradigm*. What provides this challenge is the fact that our mental, social and spiritual dimensions or capacities do not merely co-exist, but are all bound up together and with the physical, as *mutually interactive parts of the whole person*. In fact, medical and other researchers are increasingly showing a clear mind/body/spirit relationship in disease and health. No specialty is excluded. Simply put, the way we think, feel, relate, manage our lifestyle and experience stress

can maim us and even kill us! Spiritual rituals such as prayer and church attendance are being shown by research to benefit one's psychological well-being and physical health. We know that a neglect of the economic aspect of persons due to injustice results in poverty which represents the greatest single underlying cause of disease.

Thankfully, in the newer perspectives of medical science, health in its total aspect includes the bio psychosocial perspective of G. L. Engel, but also goes beyond it to integrate the spiritual in a maximum quality of life called "wellness" where persons can become whole. *The Biblical world view* has long since maintained such a unified vision of the person. So when we look in Genesis at the account of creation, the body of the person is made from the elements of nature, or "dust." The person becomes a living soul (or "*nepesh*" in Hebrew) because God breathes the "breath of life" into him (Genesis 2:7). *The Biblical view of wellbeing is also one involving the whole person.* St. Paul writes to the Thessalonian Christians: "May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:23, NIV).

From the "new" medical understanding and the "renewed" Biblical perspectives, health or wellbeing, now ought to mean "wholeness". This is *an integration or harmony between body, mind and spirit; between the individual and others; between the individual and nature; and between the individual and God as the one who holds us together.* This is illustrated in figure 1.





**Figure 1. Wholeness as Harmony**

This recovery of the “both/and” or whole person paradigm means that *we will be engaged in an approach of **healing** whole persons*. This would be in contrast to the approach of *treating specific ailments of “machine parts”*. This paradigm applies to us no matter how much we may specialize or “sub-specialize”. It affirms that God intends for Christian health care workers to have the identity of being Ministers of Whole Person Healing, through Christ.

*As the whole person becomes healed, our mental, relational and spiritual as well as our physical capacities become attended to, and harmonized with each other through God. Thus they become restored and liberated to their full potential!* Our inherent *dignity and worth* become fully respected and we reclaim our *positive self identity*. This is the restoration of God’s image! We can now easily recognize the dynamic relationship between the restoration of God’s image and achieving wholeness. Hence my proposition that one of the best ways that Christian health professionals can affirm God’s image in others is to fulfil Christ’s mandate to be whole person healers! Thus affirming God’s image in persons will occur both as a *reason* for Whole Person Healing and a *result* of this ministry.

Though often marred by an eclipse of its meaning, the image of God in persons never disappears. In a real sense, the marring exists more in the minds of the victimizers and those who accept a victim status than it does in reality. *No matter how alienated from God, broken and oppressed that we are – no matter how destructive we may become, we never lose the dignity and potential of being God’s image. Our capacities may have become latent, but they can once more be released in their fullness! We are always blessed with the Divine possibility of becoming whole through healing.* The vandal may deface the work of art, but in the hands of the Great Artist, always, the image can be restored!

### **Practical applications**

What are some of the practical implications of all this?

First of all, a true Whole Person Healing Ministry will involve **a multidisciplinary approach** to service delivery. Where possible this should involve a *multidisciplinary team* providing medical, counselling, social casework and community services, along with spiritual ministry including prayer for divine healing and spiritual counselling. This team approach would involve *Whole person history taking and assessments and interdisciplinary team referral and dialogue.* Whether within a team or otherwise, *each Christian health professional could also themselves function as a “generic whole person health care giver”* using as many of the relevant modalities as they can manage.

In the end, we will have to be willing to *abandon our professional territorialism* in the interest of multidisciplinary teamwork. Here professionals from any discipline could take leadership.

Physicians, psychiatrists, social workers and clergy will have to be prepared to share their political power and resources. In a real sense we are all members of a common body of healers; "...the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' and the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!'" (1Corinthians12:21NIV). It is as the each professional loses his or her particular power and this allows for wholeness instead of fragmentation of care that true healing takes place.

Secondly Whole Person Healing calls for **promoting healthy lifestyles**. Despite the most advanced pharmacological and technological cures *it is only a self responsibility for healthy living that will afford whole person well being. This fulfils the power of choice that comes with being created in God's image.*

Thirdly, the Christian health professional should minister wholeness in **the context of building community**. Thus we can *encourage healing communities* in the "neighborhood" community and in the local faith congregation. Small groups for support and action provide an excellent way of building community.

***Community, versus isolation, is the only human context in which whole person healing can take place.*** This is because wholeness, which is an aspect of being in God's image, involves *harmony with one's social environment*. Affirming God's image through Whole Person Healing means *including the poor and marginalized* for whom no one else stands because they are not deemed to be fully human. This is what building community affords.

These three approaches to Whole Person Healing can be practiced anywhere, in public clinics, in private offices, in hospitals, in churches and in communities. No specialty that treats any aspect of the person needs to be an exception.

## CONCLUSION

We have reflected that we are human because we are made in the image of God. Thus like Him we have capacities that are multidimensional but interconnected to make us whole persons. There has been a massive *eclipse or overshadowing of the meaning* of what it is to be human. This is because of the philosophies of material and social determinism. We have seen where these philosophies have given licences to a *marring or defacing of God's image* in us resulting in a crisis of global dehumanization.

This can be countered by the rediscovery of the wholistic paradigm of the Bible which will enable whole person healing. This will take place as the patchwork medicine of *treating "machine parts"* becomes transformed into an approach of healing of whole persons. This ministry affirms God's image by restoring and liberating God's capacities within us of being mental, relational and spiritual beings or being 'creative, loving and transcendent'. We need to do this by being faithful in our practice to all its basic strategies of multidisciplinary teamwork, promoting healthy lifestyles and building community as a context of healing.

Let us all live out our identity of *Ministers of Whole Person Healing!*

Every Christian health professional everywhere needs to have the spiritual courage and political will to adopt and advocate for this approach to healthcare to be applied in all clinical settings, as a matter of urgency! Let us advocate for the transmission of this vision through our theological learning as well as continuing education and research. This affirming of God's image by the

ministry of Whole Person Healing is the dynamic needed for Health and Hope in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, for our lives, for those we serve and for the world. This ministry should not be a neglected possibility in healthcare. Let us work to make it an accessible global reality. For us to obey the call of Christ to confront the challenges of our times in this way is not a maybe. For us it is a must!