

THE CHURCH AND WHOLISTIC HEALTH CARE

As Chairman of Christian Health Association of Nigeria's (CHAN) Wholistic Health Care Project (WHCP), I am glad to welcome you to this workshop. I congratulate you on realizing that the importance of this workshop was enough to make you leave your very busy schedules. I say importance with good reason, for we are going to be dealing with issues that not only affect the health of our members but also your own health, with matters that will not only affect the health of our churches but also with concerns that could even affect the continued viability of our churches.

If nothing else, it can be argued that our class interests are at stake, our interests as church leaders and pastors. If you see how our members are trooping by droves out of our churches towards the new mushroom healing churches, then you should recognize the handwriting on the wall, the crisis that is facing us as leaders of mainline churches. It is time we take the bull by the horns. It is time we examine the issues objectively, fearlessly; that we analyze the reasons why more and more people are finding our churches less and less relevant to their lives. And we want to do this in this workshop by concentrating on the issue of Wholistic Health Care (WHC). So, I bid you a joyful and sincere welcome to this workshop with the prayer that the Spirit of God will give us a spirit of openness.

Openness – that is a much needed quality on the part of us pastors. With the various challenges that people hurl our way these days, we cannot afford to simply stand on our traditional ways of doing things. We are a young church in Nigeria, but many of us pastors have already become very traditional in our thinking and become very upset when our traditional ways of working are being challenged.

Right now here in Jos, the Fuller School of World Missions is holding a course in Missiology at masters degree level and they are discussing the *contextualization* of the Gospel, how the Gospel can be presented and worked in a way that speaks to the people, that accepts people where they are and is willing to take them from there on. During the course, many reports have been given of pastors who tried to include various aspects of Nigerian tradition into their ministry while taking care to avoid unacceptable Traditional religious aspects. Several of these pastors have been defrocked, booted out of the ministry, by their denominations. At least one of these denominations is present here this evening. Other reports have it that pastors that have started faith healing have similarly been disciplined by colleagues or administrators who were simply closed-minded, who refused to carefully weigh the issues, who practiced ostrich politics. You must know that the ostrich, when it is afraid or attacked, hides its head in the sand so that it cannot see the threatening danger. Well, it is time we quit being ostriches, quit closing our eyes to where our people are going. If you don't take your head out of the sand now, sooner or later you will have to come up for breath and you will find your people have all left you for greener spiritual pastures.

Definition of Wholistic Health Care

If we are going to work with WHC, we should begin by describing what it is we are talking about. In the first publication of WHCP, entitled *Wholistic Health Care of, for and by the People*, on page 17, I describe WHC roughly as follows:

WHC is a form of health care that searches for the root cause of a patient's problems. It identifies the physical aspect of the problem and treats it, but it goes on to search for the root cause, which will often be non-physical. That cause may be found within the patient, in his relationship to God, to his community (family, local, national, international) or in the environment.

Now that description of WHC envisages an approach to health care very different from what the CHAN churches practice. It is so different, in fact, that when CHAN was first approached about it, a lot of opposition arose within its ranks. People felt threatened and entertained all sorts of misgivings. Some thought we were opposed to the methods of modern medicine. Others were afraid we were advocating charismatic philosophy. Yet others suspected us of wanting to return to traditional Nigerian medicine. None of these, of course, were true and that has been recognized by now.

The health care of mission churches, of CHAN churches, has made tremendous contributions to our country. Anyone denying that fact, is either blind or has some ulterior motive for such an outrageous denial. Church health care has been carried out mostly in the tradition of modern medicine or, as I prefer to call it, biomedicine. That type of medical care has done virtual wonders or miracles for millions of people who, without such medical care, would have died prematurely. Biomedicine must continue to be accepted as a gift from God. Healing via biomedicine is as much divine healing as any other form of healing, an argument I develop in the aforementioned booklet. Recently the Institute of Church and Society published a book "You Can Do Greater Things Than Christ." The author of that book rightly argues that biomedicine is one of the ways in which Jesus' promise in John 14:12 is fulfilled, the promise that His disciples will do greater things than Christ Himself has done. Any approach to health care that ignores, bypasses or berates biomedicine must be based on poor theology and lack of historical understanding of the development of science and technology.

However, having affirmed biomedicine, we must also recognize its limitation as it has been practiced traditionally. I do not have time to explicate all of these shortcomings in this presentation. They are amply described in our booklet which I would urge you to read before tomorrow morning, if you have not already done so. In summary, let me say that as biomedicine has been practiced in our hospitals and clinics, the following problems have arisen:

1. It has concentrated almost exclusively on the physical aspects of sickness, ignoring other factors that influence health.

Result: This concentration has created a health care system based almost exclusively on technological machinery so expensive that we can no longer afford it. The knowledge is within reach, but the actual care is eluding our people more and more.

2. It tends to view the human body as a machine, individual parts of which need to be repaired or replaced. It tends towards excessive compartmentalization, where one person treats the toe, another the liver and a third the elbow without anyone treating the whole body, let alone the whole person.
3. It ignores the belief system or worldview of the patient and thus fails to address his heart. Whereas the patient may be worrying about evil spirits or angry ancestors or witchcraft, the doctor lectures him about boiling his water and wearing shoes or takes out his appendix.

Result: When the biomedicalists have done their job, the patient is not satisfied in his heart. His fears have not been taken care of. So, he ends up going to the local juju men to find out the underlying cause of his problem. In effect, the Christian community is saying that it has no solution or answer for such fears.

4. It ignores the teachings of the Bible regarding so-called faith healing, deliverance from evil spirits, etc.

Result: Many of our members end up going to faith healing churches, where that neglected aspect of the Bible has been reinstated and honoured.

5. In fact, biomedicine is proud and looks down on any other healing traditions. Hence, not only has concern for evil spirits and other spiritual causes of sickness been suppressed, but the entire gamut of African traditional medicine has been condemned lock, stock and barrel as having nothing to offer at all. Same for acupuncture and all other forms of alternative healing.

Result: The condemnation of all other methods fails to take into consideration the Biblical teaching that God has revealed Himself to all peoples. Biomedicine has ignored what we theologians refer to as Common Grace. No matter how mistaken some religions or cultures may be, God has not left them totally to their own devices. There are elements of truth that we ignore only at our own impoverishment.

6. Biomedicine has finally led to the impression that only medical people know anything about health or sickness and therefore we immediately refer anyone who is sick to a medical doctor – at least, to the extent we can afford their services and to the extent that its practitioners have been successful in thus persuading us.

Result: The Church has relegated all aspects of health care to medical people and institutions. Pastors are hardly involved, except in an occasional prayer. However, when we are honest, we hardly expect any great results from our prayers. Miraculous healings are considered illegitimate, for God is not charismatic.

7. Biomedicine has failed to take seriously the fact that the greatest reason for sickness and disease in this world is not the body, but *wrong politics*. Wrong politics such as injustice, oppression and the like have created conditions that make people weak and sick more than any other factor in human society. If we are going to talk about WHC, we *must* address political questions.

Result: You find that medical establishments and groups like the Nigeria Medical Association often fight for privileges and for other conservative policies that do nothing to undo wrong political allocations of resources and thus encourage sickness rather than fight it.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, colleagues, I welcome you to this workshop for you are about to delve into a new adventure of WHC in which all of these issues will be discussed in one way or the other. You as pastors have a very important role to play in the reformation of health care. Through CHAN, we as churches have already made significant impact on health care in Nigeria. We do this via our hospitals and clinics. We do this through CHAN's programmes of CHANPHARM, the Management Project and Primary Health Care. New insights and new challenges are continually cropping up. As pastors of churches that have set up CHAN, we have every reason to be proud of our Christian contributions to health care. Recently, I had the honour of having visited the Federal Minister of Health, Dr. Ransome-Kuti, and he described the work of CHAN as very impressive throughout the country, and so it is.

WHCP is adding a new exciting dimension to health care that will involve you as pastors much more in health concerns than ever before. You will be called upon to work hard at new insights into health and sickness, new insights into the Bible. You will be called upon to be open-minded and consider the issues objectively and Biblically without fear or prejudice.

Let us pray that we will be led by the Spirit of God in this venture, that we will develop a spirit of discernment. In the words of Paul in Philippians 1:9-11:

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.