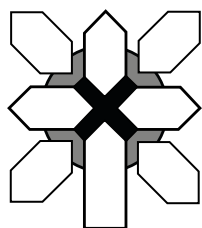


The Christian Fellowship of Healing (Scotland) worked from the early 1950's to support and spread the healing ministry within churches and to encourage engagement with the medical profession. To further these aims a centre was run in Edinburgh where people could come for prayer, listening and healing. A loving and supportive prayer community formed, which came to an end in 2011. This document is part of a legacy of resources which we hope will support others in their engagement with the healing ministry. More archived material is available to the public at the National Library of Scotland.

In 2010/11 the Christian Fellowship of Healing produced two newsletters which were designed to stimulate discussion and debate on the relationship between prayer and healing – their place in churches and their role in current society. The Spring 2010 issue is produced in full in the following pages (followed by the former Credo used by CFH). The Spring 2011 issue is available separately.

Former CFH Resources can be found at:

www.st-cuthberts.net | www.mindandsoul.info
www.emmaushouse-edinburgh.co.uk



Prayer and Healing Forum

Promoting discussion about healing

Issue 1 Spring 2010

Anne Douglas was Chairperson of the Christian Fellowship of Healing for three years. Formerly a solicitor who specialized in mental health law she then took a part-time degree in complementary therapies. She currently works as a part-time administrator, practices reflexology treatments and works for a few hours each week for a charity that offers complementary therapies to cancer patients in the Fife area. She is interested in the ways prayer is being researched by medical and social scientists.

What is the Point of Prayer and Healing Research?

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Introduction

Since the 1980s there has been a growing interest amongst psychologists and medical science academics about prayer. Many of these studies have findings which are informative to those involved in the healing and prayer ministry. This research has tended to focus on prayer as a coping mechanism, on the relationship between psychological 'types' and preferred styles of prayer, and on whether there are health benefits linked to prayer. The latter include much-publicised clinical trials in the United States which sought to 'test' the efficacy of distant intercessory prayer, usually for those in cardiac or intensive care units.

Yet there can often be indifference, and sometimes hostility, towards research into what is seen as sacred territory. Certainly the attempt to 'test' the efficacy of intercessory prayer by methods usually reserved for the testing of drugs has been riddled with crude assumptions about the nature of prayer and of God (although He doesn't usually get much of a mention) and these studies have met with considerable criticism from both scientists and theologians. However, it does seem to me that there is a growing body of research being carried out into various subjects that may have much relevance to those in the prayer and healing ministry.

I have also been struck by those who now refer to research in this area. For example, Jim McManus¹, a Redemptorist priest who has been involved in the healing ministry for over thirty years (and who spoke on healing and self esteem in 2007 at the Christian Fellowship of Healing), in the introduction to his new edition of 'Healing in the Spirit' cites

the work of a number of key researchers² in the health and religion field explaining their findings that religious practices are linked to improved physical and mental health. He also highlights the fact that not only is research being carried out into an area long shunned by medical practitioners and scientists, there are also courses now being taught in medical schools in the United States which focus on the role of religious practices in health and well-being. Having acknowledged the great change that appears to be happening in the medical scientific world, Jim McManus rightly raises the question for Christians, "Are we now ready to respond to this change and enter into a new partnership between the Church and the medical world for the promotion of the true welfare of the sick?"³ If the answer to this is 'yes', then it is essential to have some familiarity with the research in this area and to see its relevance to the work that we do.

It appears that the big, broad-brush studies which set out to establish efficacy between certain religious practices and particular health outcomes are now being replaced by more refined studies, which I find I can relate more easily to the work of CFH (Christian Fellowship of Healing). There are two levels to this:

- Firstly, there are various small-scale qualitative studies now emerging which generally focus on the experience, beliefs and feelings of those involved in prayer or other spiritual practice. Such studies, often concerned with the "subjective, intrinsic, interior... domains of human spiritual life"⁴ are still in their infancy. I refer to one of these studies below, the experience of compassionate love amongst Trappist monks, and I see some of the findings

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and reflections in this paper as a potential source of new questions for CFH.

- Secondly, there are studies being undertaken which will yield factually helpful information for us – for example, the work of Professor Ladd (see below) and how it fits in with our work on prayer and movement.

The language of love

The type of research that I often find of greatest interest tends to be very modest, small-scale studies which are primarily empirical or investigative in nature. Their interest for me is that they may contribute to the process of looking afresh at healing or prayer, particularly because they approach the subject from a novel perspective and therefore can help us formulate new questions.

A good example of this is a small study of Trappist monks⁵ which focuses on their understanding and experience with making choices involving compassionate love. The author, Lynn Underwood, conducted in-depth interviews with thirteen monks, aged between thirty-five and seventy-five. She asked them to focus on their daily experience of making such choices. Included were questions such as; ‘describe the internal process by which you make choices when confronted with a daily event calling for decision between self and other and calling for words or actions.’

"Prayer was given as a key element to support compassionate love, and spiritual reading was considered important to ground oneself in writings of wisdom."

At CFH the core of our work takes place in small groups that meet weekly, and five of the eight groups are open to anyone. Welcoming the newcomer is therefore central to the work of our groups which we see as offering healing through companionship, prayer, Bible reflection and meditation. However, finding language that describes the subtle processes that take place within our groups and that can give rise to healing can be difficult.

Interestingly, Underwood found that the monks did not use explicitly religious or theological language in most of their answers. Central features mentioned in interview included humility, trust, respect, unselfishness, receptivity, openness and detachment. Part of the interview also asked about practices that might encourage and sustain the expression of compassionate love. The sorts of things highlighted by the monks included developing a strong identity and awareness of who one is which doesn't depend on other people, and spending time in quietness and solitude. Prayer was given as a key element to support compassionate love and spiritual reading was considered important to ground oneself in writings of wisdom. Added to these were community and relationships and particularly living in a community which supports the

value of love. The author's own comments in carrying out and reflecting on these interviews are very helpful. She notes how a comparable interview with students did not give rise to the complexity and insight that the monks articulated. Underwood also brings to the fore her own experience of the monks over a twelve year period. She comments on their listening with care and attentiveness to the details of her life and their remembering of these details on subsequent visits; ‘it was as if my concerns became his concerns’. She also highlights the way in which the monks conduct themselves in the detail of life, for example, how they answer the phone.

Whilst CFH obviously cannot emulate the intensity of monastic practice we do hope to be a community which supports the value of love. Reflecting on what the monks describe both in terms of their internal experiences and their views about what encourages compassionate love may help CFH to understand more clearly what nourishes its members and therefore what qualities we can bring to encounters with newcomers.

Moving Prayer

For several years now, our Chaplain Jenny has been offering day or evening workshops on Jesus' Prayer in Aramaic. Last year, over four evenings, she facilitated a series entitled 'Living More Fully', teaching us to sing the words Jesus used in Aramaic when he taught 'Our Father' to his disciples. We were introduced to simple movements so that the essence of the words became a prayer in our bodies, not just our heads. This way of praying allows the words to be felt and experienced in our bones, muscles, circulation and nervous systems, which supports the natural balancing and immune systems of the body to work well and increase health and vitality.

A three year large-scale research project⁶ which will finish in 2010, is researching issues directly relevant to this style of prayer. Professor Kevin Ladd will conduct three studies into the relationship between prayer and the physical body. In the first study, he will investigate how the body is positioned during various prayer acts. The second study seeks to discern any unique qualities associated with bodily movement (walking) during prayer. In a final study, relations between prayer and the body as a vehicle for sight and sound receive attention. As part of this work he is also interested in the benefit of prayer "tools" such as the labyrinth, and the role of physical experience during the act of prayer, for both the self and the observed others. It is likely that the findings of such research will not only provide evidence for the validity of the sort of work our Chaplain is offering in courses such as 'Living More Fully', but help give us more information as to why such ways of praying may be healing.

Transforming Our Struggles: Forgiveness

In the last few years there has been a surge of research into forgiveness (a good place to find out more about this is <http://www.forgiving.org/campaign/research.asp>) and some of this work appears very relevant to what CFH is doing. Jenny ran a series of courses called 'Transforming Our Struggles', on the themes of anger, fear and forgiveness (it is our intention to run these again). These courses were structured to give

" Whilst CFH obviously cannot emulate the intensity of monastic practice we do hope to be a community which supports the value of love."

participants a basic understanding of the topic using current biology and recent psychology, and relating theology to both these disciplines. From a healing perspective, the purpose of the courses was to pray and meditate together, helping people find that which enables changes to their body, mind, emotion and spirit, and which provides a greater sense of potential and purpose to their lives.

Emerging research in the field of forgiveness is beginning to establish the dramatic alteration to biological and mental processes that forgiveness produces.⁷ The findings from one study suggest that emotionally experiencing forgiveness will have a more direct effect on health and well-being than simply making a decision to forgive.⁸

So what then is the evidence about what may lead to forgiveness? A very recent paper⁹ reviewed seven studies and found that people are more forgiving towards their transgressors if they see themselves as capable of committing similar offences. A person's capability to forgive seems to be influenced by three factors: (a) seeing the other's offence as less severe (b) empathic understanding and (c) perceiving oneself as similar to the transgressor. The authors reviewed report that forgiveness was more predictable where a person's own offences were similar to the target offence in terms of both severity and type. The personal capability to forgive was more pronounced among men than women. Part of the challenge for CFH will be how we incorporate an understanding of such research into future courses or day events. However, it is very encouraging that the emerging research in this field seems supportive of CFH's broad approach to healing, particularly its understanding of the importance of embodied experience, both as that which can block healing but also that which can bring healing, hence Jenny's interest in and work with moving prayer. A study¹⁰ which has yet to be completed, looks specifically at 'embodied forgiveness'; how feeling scared, feeling like getting even, feeling sorry for someone else, and forgiveness relate to one's health.

Conclusion

That research will continue to be published which has direct relevance to those involved in prayer and healing ministry is beyond question. Indeed there may now be a second phase underway of this type of research, where studies have become more refined, have learnt from some of the cruder assumptions of their predecessors and seem to be making an effort to be theologically sensitive. Whether those involved in the healing ministry become cognisant of this research remains to be seen. To ignore a body of knowledge which is directly relevant to our work seems myopic, not least because it may help us to ask new questions and therefore approach our work afresh.

A recent publication by NHS Scotland, the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Interfaith Council entitled 'Religion and Belief Matter – An Information Resource for Healthcare Staff'¹¹ helpfully utilises research linking religion and health. They acknowledge the troubled historical relationship between religion and science and offer this comment: "because religion and science both search for the 'truth', neither should fear the other. It is our hope that each of these disciplines, rather than competing or conflicting, will add to each other's riches and depths." Amen to that.

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Steve Hatton is administrator at the Christian Fellowship of Healing. Steve is a former student in the history of ideas and specifically in the history of science. After completing his first degree, he specialized in the field of 19th century Darwinian studies. The mind/body problem has always fascinated him.

Prayer and the Mind–Body problem

The recent launch of the Hadron Collider experiments at Cern and the publication of *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins are part (acknowledged or otherwise) of an attempt to achieve a supremacy for explanations based on the materialist philosophy. Dawkins is transparent in his approach. He wants the subject of God to be removed from discourse other than as an historically interesting idea. Science, in his view, has replaced God as a hypothesis to explain the origin of things. We now have physics, evolutionary biology, and geology to do the job God used to do. God, in his view, is now a redundant notion, it being associated with a former and less sophisticated state of knowledge.

The experiments at Cern however are no less bold (and in the writings of Stephen Hawking, no less transparent than Dawkins). A theory which unifies everything (gravity, electromagnetism and nuclear forces) will be a theory which is capable of explaining all things by the theories of physics. There won't be any room for God in this new world as understood by particle physicists, because He (or She) will be unnecessary to an understanding of the way the universe works.

In a sense none of this is new. The scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries already contained this programme and philosophers have been arguing about its implications for over 400 years. The working hypothesis that has emerged in the West, however, as the world has grown more secular, is that the universe is basically comprised of one substance, matter, and that everything that takes place in the universe does so because of the nature of matter and the forces that govern it. In a sense all that Dawkins and Hawking are doing is making explicit what is tacitly accepted in the Western scientific world and associated disciplines.

There are those who dispute the big claims of Dawkins and Hawking (quite large numbers of them actually even in the scientific community), but the problem is that there is a sort of ascendancy for this type of intellectual commitment. There are a range of different positions held by those who espouse this philosophy; for example, there are pragmatic materialists as well as those who are committed to a specific philosophical position. There are also materialists who regard consciousness as a fundamental constituent of matter which cannot be described by the language of physical processes. The situation is therefore complex and the unity between thinkers can be more apparent than real. But despite this, there has been a growing investment in reliance on explanations which are based on materialist assumptions such that those who oppose this are often placed in a defensive position. Those who dispute it are often thought of as people who still have a pre-scientific mentality or who have quaint but irrational loyalties.

Most people's response to this will be, 'So what! What does it matter to me? I still have to get a bus tonight, all my everyday cares are still there, and all my feelings are still in place. What if everything is regarded as material? How does this change anything?' In one sense, of course, it doesn't. But in an important sense, as the materialist argument is pushed closer to home, namely to the way we understand ourselves, it does start to have implications; specifically, to the whole meaning and purpose of prayer.

One of the oldest problems in philosophy is what's become known as the mind–body problem. Briefly stated, it is the idea that there is a problem in describing our mental states – wishing, hoping, thinking, feeling and so on – in terms of physical brain processes. Saying I have a pain in my finger or I am depressed can't (it is argued) be adequately described as

"The Bible never gives answers to complex questions, but it does help us approach them. It provides us with stories to understand the world, not complex theological or philosophical arguments."

physical reactions within the brain, although few would deny that physical reactions must accompany those feelings. Those who support this view tend to be people regarded as unscientific by those who seek to promote a 'one-type' description and explanation of reality.

One of the minor philosophers I studied many years ago was Thomas Henry Huxley (in many ways the precursor to Dawkins). He is known principally for his defence of the theory of evolution, and earning, due to the ferocity of his attacks on opponents, the nick-name Darwin's Bulldog. He argued for the reverse of this position, as do many neuroscientists and designers of artificial intelligence. He argued that our sense of conscious awareness was secreted by the brain during its activity – it was literally just a by-product of the brain's working. The interesting consequence of this view is that what we call consciousness can then be thought of as being like a film of our life, with the brain as the projector and with us as involved spectators watching a never-ending drama. Just as we wouldn't expect a film to influence events in the real world (a film about 9/11 wouldn't cause the actual 9/11), so it would not be possible for our mental states (the events and feelings projected by the brain which we call consciousness) to influence the actual workings of the brain. Brain states cause mental states, but not the other way round.

You might think this is crazy, but as an idea it is becoming increasingly significant again under the influence of the materialist philosophy. It might yet succeed in finally causing us to radically review the way humanity describes and thinks of itself. Some neuroscientists and those working on artificial intelligence think that it is only a matter of time before the great puzzle, which has so far prevented us from describing everything in terms of the language of physics and chemistry, will be solved. However, what are the main consequences of re-describing our understanding in this way?

- **The current idea of the self will disappear from our understanding.** It will be replaced by a description of automatic non-conscious systems and feedback loops connected to a very sophisticated calculating device (our brain) which is able to assess differences in the external and internal environment – their potential for harm or benefit to us – and select an appropriate response. We will then come to understand our current sense of the self as a metaphor for a matrix of physical processes.
- It will no longer be possible to say ‘I made this decision or I did this or I was wrong or I forgave him’: **we would cease to be able to describe ourselves as actors** (i.e. people who act at all) because the sense of self would be regarded as just an illusion created by the brain’s functions; it’s part of the film show referred to earlier in which there is a main character but it doesn’t have any reality. In future we would say, ‘my brain caused me to forgive him’ because this (forgiveness) is a useful strategy for re-establishing communication between different organisms that have had communication failures and where there is poorly adapted behaviour.
- **There will be no role for free-will.** Everything we think of as events which we shape will be shown to be consequences of causal chains. In other words we don’t shape anything.

Should we be concerned? The answer must surely be yes, because such a view runs contrary to the whole way we understand God, God’s relationship to us, our power to respond to him/her and what is meant by healing. Most pertinent is the questioning of the point of prayer in a world in which all that will occur is already predetermined and all the real decisions are taken for us by our own brain.

Just ask, would we sit around praying for a computer to stop crashing and making errors? That would seem absurd. The logical thing to do would be to design better circuitry, improve the processor, the memory and error correction devices, restrict the number of downloads or something. Prayer would be a nonsensical response to technical failure.

I don’t intend here to provide an argument to support an alternative solution to the mind–body problem. What I would do is to caution people against just rejecting the Huxley view as absurd. It is a respectable argument. It has a long history and it is sup-

ported by many other arguments, intellectual trends and very distinguished scientists. I believe the argument to be fundamentally wrong, but I am aware that I am committed to certain viewpoints which are potentially undermined by it. We all have agendas. I also believe that the only way to defeat an opposing view is to respect it and to recognise the proponent’s virtues. In this way, we produce genuine understanding and a clear appreciation of the scale of the problem we have to surmount. So what do we do? I would say that any answer to the Huxley doctrine has to be biblically based. This has to be our starting point. It is biblical insights which help us to think about problems like these. The Bible never gives answers to complex questions, but it does help us approach them. It provides us with stories to understand the world, not complex theological or philosophical arguments. The principal stories which help us here are found in Genesis and Exodus.

Genesis 1. v 26 has God saying “Let us make man in our image”. God is therefore a decision maker and, as can be seen by the rest of Genesis, He makes a lot of decisions. He is active and rests only when the task of creation is finished. We do not understand why God creates or whether there is any specific purpose served by His act of creation. We can speculate about it. We can say that it is part of God’s nature to be generous and generosity only means something if there is something upon which generosity can be bestowed; but why this world and universe? Why humans? Ultimately we are not provided with explanations. Instead we have mysteries to contemplate.

But the passage implies that because we are created in His (God’s) image we can know or understand God. It is the divine imprint which enables us to have an understanding of the divine. So for example, it is not currently possible for computers to understand us. They are our creation, but they are not sufficiently similar to us to be able to do that. They are not sufficiently created in our image to provide for mutual understanding (not yet!).

So, if we understand something about ourselves, we can understand God. Similarly, if we understand God, we can understand something about ourselves. But we would not say; whatever is understood to be true of God is also true of us and vice versa. We are talking about similar beings not identical beings. Being created in God’s image allows for mutuality and for the dialogue of prayer. These are never complete understandings. God and humans are not the same, but two quite different and distinct realities. What they have in common are certain capacities: creativity, rationality, morality and so on, which means that we, like God, can reason, can create new things and produce order and that we have a moral sense to inform our reasoning and creativity. We, therefore, are decision-makers, just as God is.

"Every attempt to completely understand God ends in failure, because God can't be confined to and by our explanations."

But what is critical for our discussion on the mind–body problem is that the partial identity of God and man, described above, extends to our self-understanding. God doesn’t tell us what to think or how to understand the world. We have similar

capacities, but not identical knowledge. We have to learn to understand and we have to be creative to understand and we are never certain of our knowledge because we are limited and dependent on limited ways of understanding things. Every attempt to completely understand God ends in failure, because God can't be confined to and by our explanations.

In Exodus 3, at the burning bush, God answers Moses cryptically when asked for his name. Moses wants to know this so he can tell the Israelites who God is and then perhaps they will listen to what he has to say and accept what God is going to do for them. God responds "I am who I am" (or in some translations "I will be who I will be"). A frustrating response (and not terribly helpful to Moses), but the point is that we shouldn't expect to be able to simply identify God. God can't be pinned down by a name. He is, literally, beyond our capacity to identify, hence His wrath at the worship of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32). God with all his mystery and lack of knowability is being replaced by a limited physical object produced according to a specification. What the Israelites have chosen to worship is something tangible and knowable.

My point is that this lack of knowability extends to the understanding of ourselves. This is part of what we share with God in being made in the image of God. The divine in us means that we also can never be completely understood, not even by ourselves. As with God, our names only help to identify us

relative to someone else, they do not provide for a complete identification of who we are. We therefore need to be very cautious of people who claim to understand others. Former CFH Chaplain Ian Cowie made the point that understanding based on love is inexhaustible. We can never know completely that which we truly love. The converse of this is that we tend to claim we know things completely when we do not value them very much. The more we are involved with something the more we know we have never said the last word.

Our understanding of ourselves, like our understanding of God, eludes the clarity which the neuro and artificial intelligence scientist seeks. We are bigger than their explanations, but this doesn't mean that we can reject their explanations without discussion. We can't reject psychology or advances in neuroscience by saying we are too mysterious to be understood. What we must do, however, is insist upon two things:

1. We should resist trying to explain the more complex in terms of the less complex.
2. We should resist humans being regarded as pure objects which can be simply represented by ideas/names.

To do both of these things is to create 'Golden-Calf' type explanations; explanations that replace the mysterious unknowable essence of humanity by concrete images.

Peter Spurgin has always been a lover of books, especially the Bible. He considers this the most important book yet written. To understand and progressively enter into the wonderful prospect it unfolds, he believes, requires grace to transcend the limited views of reality of the academic mind and accept the so-called miraculous as normal part of life, particularly for the Christian.

Shalom

One way of describing the purpose of CFH would be to say that we endeavour to build and spread Shalom. Along with the Holy Spirit Shalom was the parting gift to the Apostles of the risen Jesus, as described in John 20. Writing in Greek, John used the word 'eirene', but the word Jesus used would have been Shalom or Shalama. Shalom is certainly a more powerful and comprehensive word than eirene or peace as it is translated. It means health of body, mind and spirit, implying a good relationship not only with others but also with God. Is it not God who is the source of health and healing and the life more abundant that Jesus promised his followers? Shalom is proactive as we are called to be proactive. I am not suggesting that we have it all together in CFH, but we are seekers on the way. We invite all to join us and share in worship, prayer and Bible study, in meditation or discussion, or in the enjoyment of our togetherness and mutual concern and caring.

Our Western Society may seem to be going through a phase of excessive individualism, materialism and hostility to formal

religion, but things are changing. The growth of the healing ministry in the Church, a central concern of CFH, is perhaps only in its early stages. The preference for restorative to retributive justice and the growth of a more Christian attitude towards crime is still far from general acceptance. So too we pray for wider recognition of the vital need for the great Faiths of the world to work together for an improvement in international relations. Despite a still popular misconception that there is a necessary conflict between science and religion, the way forward is surely to adopt a 'both and' approach.

After all, it can be shown that spirituality is part of the human beings' survival kit. When this yearning for spirituality is not satisfied it leads to trouble. Different cultures will naturally develop different rituals and variations of belief but can work together in harmony. I never tire of celebrating the way in which Jesus set us an example of crossing barriers of race, religion, custom and gender when he went out of his way into hostile territory and broke every taboo by making a request of the woman he met at Jacob's well in Samaria. The story is in John 4, and the upshot for not only the woman but her whole community was a new joy and confidence in worship and a better understanding of others. 'Blessed are the peacemakers' is surely one of the Beatitudes that should have some resonance in the world today.

It was during a search for spiritual guidance that Ann Kelly came to CFH two years ago and was well and truly captivated by Jenny Williams's teaching of the Lord's Prayer in Aramaic. She is now a member of the CFH management committee and has a strong commitment to the provision of space where faith can be explored in the context of illness and recovery. Following work in the voluntary and statutory sectors, she undertook studies in Theology at New College and graduated with a Masters Degree in Theological Ethics last year. She currently works as a gardener, an evolving passion, and is striving to complete a collection of poetry.

Who Do I Say I am?

As a child I was in love with mass. Every Sunday morning my mother and I walked through the village to church. Our solemn stroll. Always in silence. Being a woman of habit my mother sat in the same seat every Sunday, the front row of the right aisle. It was a prime viewing spot for a little girl. I could see everything. It was the Eucharistic offering that captured my imagination. I was too young to receive holy communion then but this made it all the more mysterious. Strange words whispered under the priest's breath, the raising into the air of a white moon perched on top of his fingertips as his arms stretched up as high as they could go. Head backwards and upwards, he was so still, as if seeing the moon for the first time. Then the clanging of the golden bunch of bells and the sudden surge forwards as people moved towards the altar.

Giddiness in church was unacceptable but my mother never stopped me from leaning as far forward in my seat as I could during this ritual. I wanted to be close, close enough to touch the moon. Most of all I wanted to be the bell ringer, to shake that golden bunch of bells. At some point in my young years, I came to understand that this would never be possible. I was a girl. I was not allowed to serve mass. There was a boundary beyond which I could not step, the railing around the altar. Forbidden territory for women. The Eucharist came to symbolise for me a space of exclusion. To get close to the sacred drama of liturgy was the privilege of men. I came to know that all was not ok in this world between women and men and all was certainly not ok between women and God. Unutterable words in a small rural Ireland community in the late seventies, "don't be bothering yourself with such things". It was my first feminist thought!

I came to see in the exclusion of women from the centre of liturgy the power of men in the church. In my young imagination, this translated into a sense of my own inferiority. I was a branch of the ancestry of Eve, a problem. In everyday life, women seemed to be purveyors of moral angst and on this earth to be defined by the dogmas of husbands, church and state. If there was a moment that I can understand as that of my politicisation, it was Ireland's Eighth Amendment to the Constitution which prevented the legalisation of abortion at any time in the future. Women who had abortions or anyone thinking about voting in favour of the referendum were demonised from the pulpits. In my young mind, I could not accept that these women's experiences should be silenced,

slashed from public consciousness, enabling church and state to avoid the complexities of the issues involved, complexities that lived in the scrubbed-out stories of women damned. In a deep private place within, I felt the absence of God. I saw the absence of God in the punitive judgements passed on women who were perceived not to comply with the 'right' moral code. Simply, I could not see or feel the body of woman in the body of Christ.

This experience of the absence of God within myself made me feel like an impostor in this world. I lived as if I did not really have a right to be here on this earth. To live life as an impostor is to live like a festival street performer, a body contortionist always shape-shifting to fit into what you imagine

Studying the Aramaic Words of Jesus

The gospel writers chose to use
The widespread Koiné Greek,
But underlying what they wrote
A mindset we may seek,
Explore their Aramaic source:
The words the Lord did speak.

This sheds new light on what he said
And softens things thought hard.
This may remove some obstacles
Which tended to retard
The way the Gospel spread fresh hope;
Such things we can discard.

The implications will take time
More fully to expand;
May holy wisdom guide us here
As we review each strand
Of what exactly Jesus taught

By Peter Spurgin

others want you to be. Living in the absence of God was to live in the abandonment of my own self.

The significance of my first feminist thought would only become clear to me into my adult life when I began undergraduate studies at New College here in Edinburgh. My journey started in Religious Studies with intellectual and imaginative leaps into India and the Middle East. Theology and the Christian tradition were out of the question. Christianity was my rural Irish past, a past that was sealed-shut.

“Fundamental to this healing was the giving of a listening space in which the story could be told, as I experienced it.”

Certainty however can be a flimsy artifice and a series of lectures in Feminist Theology compelled me in my third year of studies. In those early lectures, I remembered the little girl who desired to go beyond the altar rails. I remembered the young woman who made a conscious decision to stay away from Christian faith communities because of that early experience of the absence of God. I began to have the most surprising conversations with both of them within myself, conversations that recalled vividly that time of abandonment. Memories, images and language coalesced to name my experience giving to me a way into what I thought had been submerged beyond touch. This was the conscious beginning of my journey home to myself. From this new intellectual and imaginative space came a revelation coruscating in its clarity; God was not and never had been absent from my life.

Feminist theologies (there are many) exposed to me the idea and the reality that theology is an endeavour which is historically and culturally conditioned. Theology does not manifest from some neutral abstract space. The Word of God in Scripture is mediated through human language and human institutions including religious and political. As such the history, the interpretation and the practice of theology is subject to human structures of power. It is embedded in “a labyrinth of associations”,¹ a labyrinth that includes gender, sexuality, economy, culture, politics, power.

In its intellectual evolution and ritual practices, theology has traditionally failed to acknowledge its place in this earthy web of relationality. Consequently, biblical interpretation and the public faces and voices of the human institutions of the church have been the preserve of those with power in society. In her differentiation between history and the past, the Irish poet Eavan Boland suggests that history is “official and articulate”, the past is “silent and fugitive”.² History (the official story) is the one told by those with the power to do so, by those who can be heard. The official story, from a theological perspective, has been assumed to be a universal story, one that embodies a homogenous Christian community.

Feminist theologies have ruptured this core of theology's patriarchal foundation through a critical analysis of texts, historical documents and interpretations for that which is silenced, the voices that are marginalised, experiences that are edited out because they do not fit into the authoritative view. In the silent and fugitive spaces, feminist theologies have revealed the realities of women and men marginalised, pushed away from the centre of discourse through patriarchal and androcentric language which assumes uncritically that there is a universal human experience applicable to all regardless of gender, sexuality, cultural or political experience. Feminist theologies insist on the validity of experience or the context of reality-as-it-is as the point from which to do theology. Reality-as-it-is and tradition are engaged in a dynamic interaction through which biblical texts are critically scrutinised and explored for meaning and relevance. Readers become active participants in the interpretation of the text in a process that is grounded in dialogue within community. Scripture is no longer stone-sacred dogma, something to be handed down from on high, interpretations disconnected from the lives of individuals and communities of believers. Space is created for a myriad of voices to give expression to the experiences of God in and between us.

Finding language for my own experience of God-made-absent began the loosening of a story that had become caked in silence. God-made-absent was the abandonment of love and justice, concretely manifest through human structures of sin that denied many women (and many men) space to explore the full complexities of their lives from their own life experiences in their own language and through their own imaginative processes. In essence a denial of the process of self definition, for to explore what do I say my God is, is to confront the question, who do I say I am?

“Healings are resurrections, renewals, the full breath of new life. Healings happen in relationship, within communities where the living Word of God engages and transforms.”

Language gives shape and form to stories, inscribing them beyond silence into dialogue within ourselves and in community. In the finding of language, memory became vivid, a deep well from which the story seeped. To find my own sense of God, my sense of the value of life, I had to dive into the memory of absence, a dive into the wreckage of life that was sunken deep in my bones. In the words of the poet Adrienne Rich “I came to see the damage that was done and the treasures that prevail”.³ Finding the language and images in the silence would begin the healing of the damage done. In this healing I would come to feel deeply the actual presence of God in my life. I would come to know and feel my sense

“Our responsibility in community is to enable each person to find the threads she needs for her own healing. ”

of the value of my life on this earth. This enlivening of the silenced story resourced me to accept and trust welcome and love in what are now my faith communities. Fundamental to this healing was the giving of a listening space in which the story could be told, as I experienced it.

Our Chaplain, Jenny, points to the boundless “healing threads” of God’s healing love.⁴ Our responsibility in community is to enable each person to find the threads she needs for her own healing. To know what we need for our healing necessitates the knowing of our stories. Stories are sense-makers and my own experience teaches me that healing is deeply intimate to sense-making.

Healings are resurrections, renewals, the full breath of new life. Healings happen in relationship, within communities where the living Word of God engages and transforms. Marcella Althaus-Reid argues that resurrections are earthy, communal, “in the tension of the present, but ‘not-yet-among-us’, Reign of God”.⁵ Jesus did not resurrect in an abstract heaven. It was a community event, given witness by women and men who told the story, who continued the conversation with him that had begun before his death. The bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is the paradigmatic event that tells us of the sheer viability of life. It tells us that life necessitates active bodily engagement, the presence of closeness, so close that pain, joy, hope, love, the unknown and the unexpected touch our skins.

The fragment of the story I write comes from a breathing space found in feminist theology. The religion of my childhood abstracted God from my life experience as a young woman and the life experiences of women around me. Necessary voices of difference were smothered in the undergrowth of dogma. Within feminist theology I found a way to explore ‘Who do I say I am?’, which I now understand as life’s ongoing process of self-definition embodied in the God who is “God not of the dead, but of the living”.⁶ In coming to know our stories and in the processes of our healings is the refusal of human half-heartedness; the refusal to “half-live our lives, half-dream our dreams, half-love our loves”.⁷ The refusal lived by Jesus.

Footnotes

- ¹ Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time*, (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1995), p. 133
- ² Caffeine Destiny, ‘An Interview with Eavan Boland’ (no date), <http://caffeinedestiny.com/boland.html> (accessed September 18th 2008)
- ³ Adrienne Rich, *Diving Into The Wreck: Poems 1971 - 1972* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1973), p. 23
- ⁴ Jenny Williams, ‘Towards a Theology of Experience through an Exploration of the Practice of Healing Ministry’. Contact Christian Fellowship of Healing (Scotland) for details
- ⁵ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2004), p. 113
- ⁶ Matthew 22:32-33
- ⁷ Brendan Kennelly, *The Book of Judas: A Poem* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991), p. 11

Jenny Williams has been Chaplain of CFH for twelve years. After training in biological sciences. Jenny lived for a year in the ecumenical Christian community of Taizé. She later trained and worked as a social worker, before taking a theology degree and then living in a Christian Ashram in India. She is an ordained minister of the Church of Scotland, part of the Presbytery of Edinburgh. Jenny's interest is in finding ways to pray and meditate that bring balance to body, mind, emotion and spirit, allowing healing and a greater sense of potential and purpose to our lives.

Living With the Unexpected

As an organisation the Christian Fellowship of Healing has lived with many unexpected things over the past few years. We needed to move premises in 2006, I was ill for a large part of 2008 and financial crisis hit us at the beginning of 2009. Many of you have responded warmly and generously to the latter situation for which we are deeply grateful.

Where is God in this? Or perhaps a more useful question is; in what way is God in this? When we moved to St Columbas-by-the-Castle we spent time reflecting on the theme 'Finding our Way'. I see two really significant discoveries that we have made as an organisation in terms of finding our way.

First, my absence meant that all our regular members are now aware of how crucial their role is in embodying our ministry. Our groups, through the welcome they offer and the prayerfulness they live, stood solidly firm. They faithfully continued our healing ministry without a chaplain. This is a strong witness to ourselves of our capabilities and also of the strength of the form of small group ministry.

On my return, not only did I feel welcomed back and securely 'at home' in a way that brought reassurance and healing to my own being, but also we were able to reflect more deeply than before on the different ministries within our community – the ministry of the groups, the ministry of the Chaplain and the ministry of management and administration. The crystallization of this inter-relationship of the parts of our whole, this partnership of ministries clearly showed me that the Holy Spirit was at work in our midst bringing new light, sharpening awareness of who we are and the different shapes and forms that make up 'who we are'.

Secondly, the ministry of management and administration has been an aspect of our communal life that we have shied away from in the past, focusing rather on prayer as the centre of our work. Prayer remains our primary commitment, yet without structures in place, the ministry of the groups could not function. Again, at least partly due to my absence, we have seen more clearly the vital need for good internal communication (difficult when groups meet on different days and at different times).

We have also begun building good formal organisational relationships with external bodies, the mainline churches and the NHS. Steve Hatton, our administrator, has brought considerable gifts and experience of organisational structure so that for the first time in my dozen years as chaplain, it seems to me that we are on the cusp of fulfilling one of our aims – to

restore the ministry of healing to its rightful place as an integral work of the Church.

We are in conversation with the Ministries Council of the Church of Scotland about integrating healing into ministry training for ministers, and we have had meetings with the Scottish Episcopal Church and the United Reformed Church. We have created an ecumenical Study Leave course for Healing in Ministry which took place this April for people from all these church traditions.

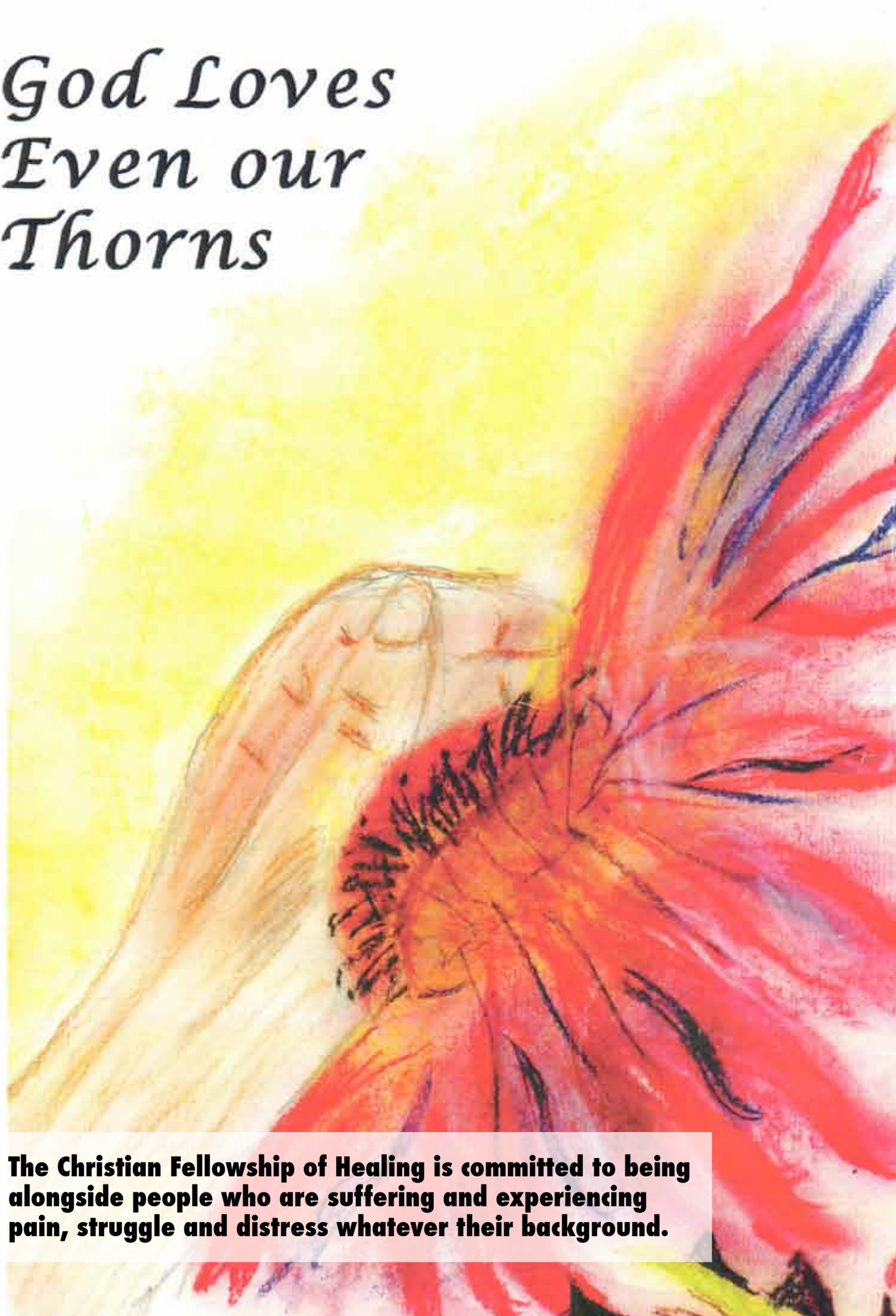
Looking at another of our aims, "to link the healing ministries of the church and the medical profession", we are currently planning a day event to bring together people involved with healing ministry to look at the new developments in the NHS regarding spirituality, probably in 2011. This is a tricky area, raising many issues, yet we consider there is great potential for churches to offer support to individuals and families facing serious illness and on-going chronic ill-health. We hope this day will help to map this territory, so that this new orientation in healthcare might link with the healing and pastoral tradition of the church. Perhaps there is something new coming to light here, as yet without clear shape, waiting for the Spirit to guide us....

As the groups have moved into a greater awareness of competency, so the managerial side of CFH has found strength and potential. Together we are finding that our ministry is expanding. Through the groups we are providing a network of prayer, a place of welcome and an increasing sense that we have a heritage of working with a small group format that can be a resource for others to follow in local churches. Through more structured management we are offering training, as well as theological and practical knowledge, to bring the Christian healing tradition into the vocabulary and ministry of churches. Through our Chaplaincy these two threads of our ministry, which are inter-related and woven together, bring shape and texture to one another, stimulating life.

I suggest that we have been discovering how to find life by relating with the unexpected. This is different from surviving unexpected things. This is a way of being that trusts God is waiting for us in the unexpected situations. Sometimes people have said that God is hiding waiting for us to do the finding.

I do think we are finding our way, following God's call in the unexpectedness. It is a call that is supporting us to be creative, encouraging us to re-form so that this organisation can continue in the image of God – Creator, Lover, Healer.

God Loves Even our Thorns

A watercolor illustration of a hand holding a thorny branch. The hand is rendered in soft, warm tones of pink, orange, and yellow, with visible brushstrokes. The branch is dark brown with several sharp, black thorns. The background is a bright, hazy yellow. To the right, there are vibrant, abstract strokes of red and blue, suggesting a flower or a flame. The overall style is soft and expressive, with a focus on light and color.

The Christian Fellowship of Healing is committed to being alongside people who are suffering and experiencing pain, struggle and distress whatever their background.

The Christian Fellowship of Healing (Scotland) is an interdenominational Christian Fellowship, bound together by a commitment to offer a ministry of listening and healing prayer. The Fellowship:

Is **united** in its commitment to the practice of prayer as the foundation of all our ministry.

Is an **ecumenical** group of Christians who openly embraces a range of theological understandings and language to describe 'how' God heals.

Is **committed** to being alongside people who are suffering and experiencing pain, struggle and distress whatever their background.

Is **convinced** of the importance of the varied aspects of healing displayed by Jesus in the miracle stories.

Is **united** in our understanding that healing in the New Testament includes wholeness.

What we offer

We are ordinary people and we believe that it is ordinary people Christ calls to be His instruments. We welcome people from all faiths or none to join us in our regular programme of:

- **Small Groups Ministry.** We offer a welcome to all individuals and somewhere to come which has an atmosphere of healing.
- **Ministry to Individuals.** We offer quiet, confidential, unhurried listening, and where appropriate the ministry of scriptural prayer, laying-on of hands and the sacraments of anointing and Holy Communion.
- **Outreach.** We support and encourage churches in developing and maintaining healing ministry by visits, workshops, our leaflets and the events we run.
- **Prayer Research.** We seek to make links between healing within churches and healing within the medical profession.

We would be delighted if you could join us – further details of our meetings can be found on the CFH website, or we would be glad to discuss things with you over the phone or by email.

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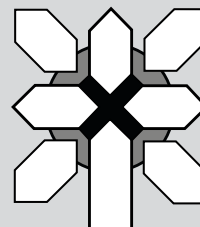
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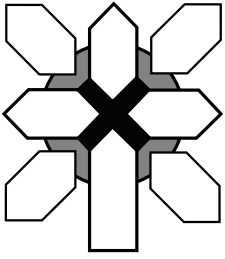
This is the first of a new publication designed to stimulate discussion and debate on the relationship between prayer and healing – their place in churches and their role in current society. This beginning offers reflections from within the community of CFH. We seek to network interest both in the theological implications and the practical outworkings of prayer and healing.

And so we welcome any comments, insights, reflections and stories you have to contribute on this theme or in response to the articles in this first edition.

Our next planned publication date is November 2010.

Please send any submissions (or if you would like to discuss a possible article for a future edition) to Steve Hatton at the Christian Fellowship of Healing. email: office@cfhscotland.co.uk tel: 0131 225 2401.





Credo

used by the

Christian Fellowship of Healing (Scotland)

The Christian Fellowship of Healing:

is united in its commitment to the practice of prayer as the foundation of all our ministry.

Prayer is the means through which we believe the Holy Spirit can use us, here and now, to continue the practice of healing incarnated by Jesus.

is an ecumenical group of Christians who openly embraces a range of theological understanding and language to describe 'how' God heals.

We accept that health and healing can and does come through medicine, counselling, complementary therapies and other means. This does not negate the real contribution of prayer, rather it upholds the role of prayer to support individuals to listen to the Holy Spirit within them, guiding them, facilitating health and healing.

is committed to being alongside people who are suffering and experiencing pain, struggle and distress whatever their background.

We acknowledge that suffering faces us all and challenges our understanding and belief. Yet we can, with integrity, offer reassurance of God's loving presence accompanying every human being as seen in Christ who has shown us the capacity of God to be vulnerable even to the point of death. Living in and from this truth of the ever present loving God we respond as authentically as possible from our hearts, and we can offer an understanding of the range of meaning of healing which includes miracles.

is convinced of the importance of the varied aspects of healing displayed by Jesus in the miracle stories.

This includes an intense personal encounter with Jesus; affirmation of the individual as a person of value, physical healing, restoration of meaning and purpose, social inclusion; as well as challenge to those in power; confronting rigid thinking and lack of compassion. We believe all these components are aspects of the transforming love of God and reflect the wholeness Jesus calls us into. We see healing as deeply linked with the Christian tradition of vocation through which the living God calls each of us to discover and fulfil our potential.

is united in our understanding that healing in the New Testament includes wholeness.

This links the transforming love that effects miracles with the transforming love that brings the disciples through their fear and resistances into their ministry of apostleship. Our experience is that the practice of prayer in small groups, with a commitment to sharing and listening, enables those of us offering healing prayer to grow in ourselves and in our capacity to experience and share God's love. This includes the reality that some people have a gift of healing and a greater capacity than average to bring about healing.
