

This is an article from the September-October 2022 issue: [Healers and Preachers](#)

*September 01, 2022 by E. Anthony Allen*

## The Healing Congregation: Total Ministry for the Whole Person

### The Story of Bethel Baptist Church, Jamaica

Mindset determines action. This affects how we meet the needs of each person. In 1972, under the leadership of the Rev. Dr. Burchell Taylor, Bethel Baptist Church reflected on the biblical theological paradigm of the church in healing. Some questioned the Western influenced Cartesian mind/body and spirit/matter dualism. Needy people were getting patchwork attention. Matters of the body would be sent to the physician, the mind to the psychologist, the spirit to the pastor and material concerns to the social worker or politician. People needed a more integrated, healing approach.

### Jamaica, Then and Now

Jamaica, with a population of 2.98 million, composed largely of descendants of those enslaved by the British, is a paradox. Since our independence in 1962 we have produced global excellence in athletics, music and tourism. Yet legacies of our enslavement and colonial past continue as perennial sociological and political struggles. These include broken, dysfunctional families with marginalized men, mainly single women as heads of households, multiple partners and teenage pregnancies. Economic hardships have divided families as many are forced to migrate from rural areas to urban centers and to the United Kingdom, United States and Canada. Domestic violence, street children, child abuse and neglect are increasing with little community support. Our high murder rate, approximately 44 per hundred-thousand, is largely inner city and gang-related driven by lack of education, drugs, reprisals and party politics. Many express black psychological self-hate as expressed in skin

bleaching. A color-class divide exists with this social stratification mirrored even within our diverse churches.

The country is still struggling to overcome poverty and underdevelopment. Traditional indigenous and communitarian cultural values have been largely undermined by the promotion of materialism through Western commerce and media.

With the increasing commercialization of health care, the impoverished majority depend on understaffed and under-equipped public services. Patients are often treated as objects rather than persons. Community-based activities and health promotion are still inadequate while mental health care suffers from stigma. Injury-care and lifestyle related diseases overburden our health care services. Seventy eight percent of people die, often prematurely, of chronic non-communicable diseases, too many due to patchwork unintegrated medicine.

### Discovering the Whole-Person Paradigm

After prayerful biblical and contextual analysis, in 1972 Bethel leaders and members begun understanding that each individual must be seen as a whole person if any human need is not to be neglected. Hence a **whole-person paradigm** would be the health care model to adopt. This means that:

1. **True health is whole-person wellness.** This is an **integration or harmony** between mind, body and spirit, between the individual and his or her social and natural environment and between the individual and God as center.

- Emotional stress promotes and worsens physical diseases.
- Physical diseases promote and worsen emotional stress.
- Both emotional stress and physical illnesses can undermine the social and spiritual aspects of our lives.

This creates a *downward spiral* of ill health of the whole person. To prevent or cure *illness*, and achieve wellness, we need to maintain a **healthy balance** through **healthy lifestyles** and a **healing ministry** for the whole person. Health is also a development issue, seeking **liberation** of the socially and economically marginalized. Thus, for Bethel, persons at the margins are a priority.

## 2. **The healing Church should therefore proclaim a total gospel**

Sin, or alienation from God, has exposed us to evil and made us vulnerable to a disintegration of the body-mind-spirit-environment. This leads to conflict and disease. Our vulnerability is met by Christ's double work on the cross where He provides forgiveness and redemption as well as reconciliation with God. This also brings healing or re-integration within our person. Thus, **a total gospel means salvation is healing and wholeness.**

3. **Christ sent His disciples to both "preach the kingdom of God, and to heal the sick..."** (Luke 9:2 TEV). This is an expression of the total gospel. As disciples today, we too are *sent to heal as part of proclaiming the kingdom of God. Thus, healing is integral to the mission and evangelism of God through the church.*

## **The Church as a Healing Community in Action**

After one year of planning and prayer, 24 members of Bethel submitted a proposal with the theology and action plan. An initial "Healing Ministry" began in 1975 with counselling services followed by an evening medical clinic in 1976. In 1984, it became established on a full-time basis with medical skills, pastoral care, counseling and prayer provided as an integrated set of services. These services reached out to the membership, the surrounding areas and underserved communities.

This "Healing Ministry" evolved into a broader understanding beyond providing primary health care services. Thus, our current whole person healing ministry is based on the following:

1. **We adopt a needs-based approach to ministry.** Different ministries have become established as various needs became evident. Today, there are over 18 different ministries. Pre-existing ministries have adjusted to focus on current concerns.
2. **We promote self-help activities among service users** for self-care and healthy lifestyles.
3. **Our ministries are comprehensive in scope** - curative, promotive and preventive, and rehabilitative. Preventive and promotive services are the

widest in range, most cost-effective and involve the most self-help activities for wellness.

Journey with us as a user:

### **1. Curative services.**

If you visit our physician and pharmacy in our clinic, you will discover that your counseling, prayer or social casework needs can be addressed.

Our prayer line provides spiritual counselling, prayer and home visits. Our deacons and other members provide a monthly homebound communion service and whole person needs evaluation.

### **2. Prevention and wellness promotion**

In the clinic we provide maternity monitoring and immunization for your children. As a private-public partnership with the government and USAID, COVID vaccination is supplied.

As you progress through your life cycle, you and your loved ones will have the benefit of premarital counseling, counseling for parents of children to be blessed, youth mentoring, provided by our men's group, as well as special activities in our "Seniors in Action" group.

Our Wholistic Health Promotion Committee provides health educational talks, family month activities, marriage enrichment sessions, health fairs with preventive screening. There is a special Healing Sunday for prayer for individuals and recognition of the church as a healing community. There are activities for female wellness groups. There are support groups such as the "Bereavement Support" group for those experiencing grief and loss and the "Rays of Sunshine" group that provides education and support for cancer, other chronic life challenges such as depression, non-communicable diseases, crisis management of various illnesses and life challenges. You can also get practical help from our Legal Aid and Justice Center, the Cyber Center (for learning computer skills and their application) and our Thrift Cooperative Society which provides financial management services. Educational needs are met by our Homework Center while our Adult Learning Center prepares people for high school leaving certification.

You can work out life issues with our life coach.

We have organized the whole church into “Birth Month” groups. Here you can choose to enjoy cohesive support, prayer, fellowship, celebrations, recreation and practical assistance in crisis. This has been an invaluable way to build Christian bonding across generations and socioeconomic backgrounds. Each group seeks to visit outside the church for ministry.

### **3. Rehabilitation**

Some people find themselves in situations where they need special rehabilitative care to help them care for themselves. Confidential access to support groups for mental health conditions and HIV/AIDS is provided.

If you or your relatives are not able care for you, we have a Special Care Ministry to make things as workable as possible.

The Homeless Ministry provides meals, bath and barbering for the homeless on special days. Persons receive prayer, casework and direction to relevant whole-person services. With spiritual ministry some have joined our membership.

In addition, through our Community Outreach Ministries, we have a basic school for children in an inner-city community prone to violence. With two others in the past, these were welcome points of entry where we offered services such as Sunday School, evangelistic crusades, health fairs, community participation in school projects, meals and backyard gardens.

## **Sustainability**

How do we ensure sustainability?

1. Our reflection and development of the paradigm and activities are essentially home grown or ***indigenous***. We learn lessons from elsewhere, but depend on the assessment and innovativeness of our members.
2. We have sought to be ***theologically reflective, prayerful, contextual and participatory***. Any new ministries are needs-based.
3. Ministries are ***lay driven and managed*** with a **multidisciplinary team approach**. Our ***enabling pastor***, now Rev. Glenroy Lalor, sees his members as much called and gifted by God, as he is. Members receive necessary training through our Lay

Training Institute. The Jamaica Baptist Union provides a discipleship lay ministry program. Ministry leaders report to the Church Council and membership for accountability and integration. Non-professionals are in the majority. Outside experts supplement presentations and consultation.

4. ***Church financing for being a healing community is highly strategic.*** Bethel received only “startup” funds from overseas and for three years. The church committed itself to sustainability. Hence there are policies for sacrificial giving and careful financial management.

While the clinic administrator and most primary care professional staff are paid, the majority of persons in the several other ministries are volunteers.

Cost recovery is possible through competitive client fees. Where necessary we use a sliding scale subsidy from the church. We plan for income generation through our pharmacy used by both clinic clients and the public. The church supplies infrastructure and utilities.

Our healing community drive has motivated a very willing *public-private government cooperation including* with the ministry to the homeless and with the COVID vaccination service. We have set up a **Bethel Foundation** for our outreach-based Whole-Person Ministries that includes partnership with private corporations.

The ministry is **undergirded by prayer** as the deacons and other prayer groups pray regularly for God’s guidance and empowerment.

## **Conclusion: Impact and replicability**

The activities of our healing congregation have been well utilized. With special adjustments and innovations during the current COVID period, we have been able to maintain the impact of our ministries.

Many of our activities have been well supported by both members and non-members, over 90 percent of whom are clinic and pharmacy clients. Today, many Jamaican denominations have various elements of a whole-person approach to ministry.

We are challenged to maintain the centrality of the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the traditionally high level of volunteerism. The church council meets biannually to evaluate and improve the church's ministry.

Can every church become a “Healing Congregation?” We believe it can be done. Bethel has demonstrated the feasibility of a congregation-based whole person healing ministry.

Take the initiative. Don't wait on outsiders to provide instruction or funding. Start at an indigenous level, let your own members identify your most pressing needs and prayerfully reflect on your biblical mindset or paradigm regarding the fundamentals of wholistic service. Start with what you have. Provide necessary training for your volunteers and plan for sustainability. With prayerful learning and increased effort your activities will grow in scale over time.

With God all things are possible.

#### About The Author

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<http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/the-healing-congregation-total-ministry-for-the-whole-person>