

Christian Health Care and Holistic Mission

by *Tetsunao Yamamori*



I traveled recently in Central Asia, where life has become especially difficult since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Health care systems are inadequate. Food shortages are common. Crime is increasing. Poverty is grinding. Economic stability is a dream. Farmlands are eroded. People's morale is down. Hopelessness and despair predominate.

However, I met several Christians who were engaged in agriculture, education, medicine, entrepreneurial business, and microenterprise development. One was a 65-year-old retired English-language teacher from the Republic of Korea. Five years ago, Mr. Kim and his wife came to a village of 2,400 people in a Central Asian republic to teach English while learning the culture and the language of the people, who are poor. They enjoy few medical facilities, their farming techniques need improvement, and—after decades of Soviet rule—they lack initiative. The republic itself, though nominally democratic, is strongly communist in practice and Muslim in religion. Missionaries do not receive visas, and gospel proclamation is prohibited.

As he established himself in the 100-percent Muslim community, Mr. Kim told the leaders, "We are not to live like this." Mr. Kim and the community leaders began identifying the problems that could be solved by: (1) themselves, (2) the government, and (3) nongovernmental organizations.

Mr. Kim and the leaders identified a lack of water for drinking and farming as the community's primary problem. Soon they began bringing spring water to the village via a plastic pipe from a mountain several miles away. Today the community can farm and can drink water safely.

Three years ago, Mr. Kim leased 70 acres from the government to found the Agricultural Development Training Center. His focus with this ministry is young people who have little hope and who often get involved in drugs and crime. The center teaches them income-producing skills, such as the English language, computer programming, organic farming, and health care. It also teaches the Christian worldview. Some of the residential students have given their lives to Christ. Mr. Kim wants to send these young people not only to the rest of the republic but also to other Central Asian countries.

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Mr. Kim says that Christian development work should aim at the whole person, not only in training, but also in ministry to others. "This means," he says, "we must address the needs of the whole person—physically, spiritually, socially, psychologically, and intellectually."

At the beginning of the 21st century, we have limitless opportunities for the church's involvement in contexts of human need. Christian health care is one dimension of holistic mission. So we must ask the question, *What is Christian about Christian health care?* Let me unpack the question a little further.

Does Christian health care have anything to do with the concept of biblical holism?

What role do the Christian health care practitioners have in the church's worldwide mission? What part does holistic health care play in the bigger picture of holistic mission?

I argue that all dimensions of holistic mission, brought together under Christ, contribute toward the fulfillment of the Great Commission. Let us look at three aspects: (1) Biblical Holism, (2) Holistic Mission, and (3) Holistic Health.

Biblical Holism

Some writers avoid using the words *holism* and *holistic* because, to them, they sound like New Age terms. To understand the meaning of holism, it is best to describe it. Four adjectives seem appropriate.

1. Holism is *w-holistic*.

John Steward says:

The Greek word *holos*, meaning whole, wholly, or complete is used by Matthew (5:29–30), Luke (Acts 3:16), John (9:34), James (1:4), and Paul (1 Thess. 5:23). Jesus (John 7:23) and Peter (Acts 3:16) are quoted using it.¹

Holism in these passages refers to the wholeness and well being of the person. Biblical holism therefore is concerned with the whole person. We should direct our work with people to the development of the whole person, just as Jesus himself grew. Luke 2:52 states: "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man."

Development is a process. It is a qualitative change of life in which a person

finds essential wholeness (socially, physically, spiritually, and in wisdom) as an individual and as a part of a community. This change ultimately occurs only through the redemptive power of the gospel. The focus of development activities, then, is the whole person. Humans are social beings in tune with God, with others, and with their environment.

2. Holism is *synergistic*.

Valson Thampu, an Indian scholar, discusses the main conceptual assumptions of holism in this way:

- (1) The whole is more than the sum of its parts,
- (2) the whole determines the nature of its parts,
- (3) parts cannot be understood if considered in isolation from the whole, and
- (4) the parts of an organic whole are dynamically interrelated or interdependent.²

Anything that is holistic, in other words, is synergistic. The whole (namely, God's mission) determines the nature of the church's many missions, including health care. Holism implies the identity and distinctiveness of various parts in their relationship to the whole and, at the same time, their relationally inseparable nature.

Dayton Roberts illustrates this point:

"For example," he says, "all the parts of a bicycle can be heaped into a 'whole'—a pile of junk. That accumulation of parts becomes holistic only when it is assembled in an intelligent, harmonious, functional way."³

The apostle Paul discusses the concept of synergy in Romans and Ephesians. In Romans 12:4–5, the apostle writes:

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

Paul reiterates this theme in Ephesians 4:11–13:

It was [God] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the

whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Biblical holism is synergistic, but it is also something more.

3. Holism is *restorative*.

Biblical holism begins to restore relationships destroyed by human sin. God said in Genesis 1:26–27:

Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

God told Adam and Eve how to live, but they chose to disobey him. This rebellion against God brought about severe consequences (Gen 3:14–24). The relationships that God created good were ruined, including the relationship between humans and God, our interactions with others, and our role as stewards over creation.

Now, biblical holism refers to God's attempt to restore and redeem all these lost relationships. God begins this process by summoning Abram to a task. God says in Genesis 12:2–3:

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

The Old Testament chronicles how God raised up the nation of Israel to redeem the world. This plan finds fulfillment in the New Testament, as God sends His own Son into the world (John 3:16) and, later, the church to carry on the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:17–19).

4. Holism is Christocentric, or Christ-centered.

John Steward also says:

Biblical holism is based on Christ's lordship over every part of life—where people who are in right relationship with God and one another (relationship) are responsibly managing the resources entrusted by him (stewardship) in ways that show that those resources belong to God (ownership).⁴

Ephesians 1:10 echoes the Christocentric nature of holism. God's redemptive history will culminate in God's bringing "all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ."

Holistic Mission

All faithful believers under Christ's lordship are charged to pursue the church's mission: to proclaim Christ and bring all people possible to faith and obedience in him (Rom 16:26). How are we to do this? Before we discuss strategic issues, let us first analyze the context of mission.

1. The context of mission.

In this new century, mission will occur where physical and spiritual needs converge. Bryant Myers of World Vision wrote in 1988 that "the poor are the lost and the lost are the poor... those who are the poorest and in greatest need of hearing the name of Jesus are living in the midst of Muslim and Marxist contexts in the two-thirds world."⁵

Dan Harrison was similarly far-sighted⁶ in 1991. He described an important geographical area for missions that we now call the "10/40 Window." Harrison noted that this area has "great physical as well as spiritual poverty." Since the fall of the Soviet Union, of course, many changes have occurred in the world, but the physical and spiritual needs of this underserved region remain largely the same.

Poverty, in various degrees of severity, plagues over half the world's population. The poor lack food and clean drinking water. Malnourishment and various illnesses are common. In addition, health care systems in the world's impoverished regions are inadequate, and, in many places, virtually nonexistent.

Ralph Winter and Bruce Koch estimated that 1.896 billion non-Christians of the total world population of 6 billion to be living within unreached people groups in 2000.⁷

2. Strategic framework.

Think of two population groups and two approaches to reach them. Several years ago, I elaborated on this concept elsewhere.⁸ I shall summarize it briefly.

The two population groups are (1) those that are open to Christianity and

(2) those that are not. I further distinguished these two groups by using four indices: hospitality, evangelization, receptivity, and the need for development.

Hospitality refers to the degree to which a country, social group, or people group welcomes Christianity. It especially refers to the quantity of and quality of social sanctions placed upon gospel witness. Ninety percent of the world's unreached people groups live in countries with social or governmental policies prohibiting the entrance of missionaries and limiting or forbidding the evangelistic activities of national Christians.

Evangelization refers to the number of people within a population who have heard the good news of Jesus Christ and the degree to which they have received the message.

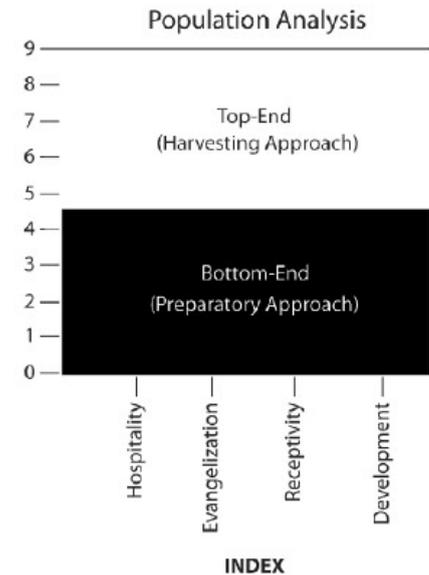
Receptivity gauges the degree to which individuals within a particular people group are open to the gospel. This differs from hospitality, which refers to societal or governmental limitations, not to the people's openness. For example, while the hospitality of China to Christian missions is low, the receptivity of the people is very high.

Development measures the physical condition of the target group. Extreme poverty has many faces. The poor are often malnourished and diseased, underemployed or without jobs, unable to provide for the basic needs of the family.

Using these four indices as a guide, we can classify population groups into two types: top-end and bottom-end. The top-end group includes countries or people groups that are most hospitable to Christianity, most evangelized, most receptive to the gospel, and most developed. The bottom-end group consists of countries or people groups that are least hospitable to Christianity, least evangelized, least receptive, and least developed. The bottom-end population type is found to the greatest degree in the 10/40 Window. Obviously, some countries and people groups fall between these two extremes, but research is key to identifying accurately who they are and into which group they fall.

3. Two basic approaches.

There are two corresponding evange-



listic approaches: a harvesting approach for the top-end and a preparatory approach for the bottom-end.

Harvesting approach

This is a direct, traditional missionary strategy characterized by sharing the Word of God overtly and forthrightly. It is common where missionaries are welcomed and people are openly receptive to the gospel. Many national Christians live in areas appropriate for the harvesting approach. Physical needs will not overwhelm all other concerns.

Preparatory approach

This is the strategy best suited for the 10/40 Window and other countries at the lower end of the scale. It involves doing something now in the hope that people will respond to the gospel later. It is appropriate in countries where career missionaries are not permitted or the people are not yet responsive to the gospel. Typically, few or no Christians live in these regions. Residents in these areas often need food, basic health care, education, clean drinking water, information on proper nutrition, small-scale technology, food production, microenterprise development, entrepreneurial business opportunities, and other measures.

4. Health care practitioners and their inescapable calling.

What role do the Christian health care practitioners have in the church's worldwide mission? The answer is clear.

All Great Commission Christians⁹ are given marching order by their Lord to

“go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them . . . and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19–20). And his teaching encompasses, among other things, care for the sick. Serious Christian health care practitioners have an inescapable calling to holistic health—restoring health to the whole person physically, spiritually, and in all aspects of his or her human existence.

Holistic Health

In *Health, the Bible, and the Church*, Daniel Fountain writes: “We consider health in terms of fitness of the body rather than of the whole person. We concentrate on diseases and how to cure them and not on how to promote health. As a result, we offer ‘sickness care’ rather than health care and do little if anything to promote the health of persons and groups.”¹⁰

Mr. Kim’s passion to address the needs of the whole person is still etched vividly in my memory. His conviction arose not so much from his biblical understanding but from his encounter with the harshness of poverty and human misery. His love for the Lord and for his neighbors compelled him to seek to resolve the community’s predicament.

What part, then, does holistic health care play in the bigger picture of holistic mission? I maintain that Christian health care, along with other dimensions of holistic mission, brought together under Christ, contributes toward the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

1. All dimensions under Christ.

The taxonomy of relief and development work generally includes (a) disaster relief, (b) water resource development, (c) food production, (d) business enterprises, and (e) health care. Different organizations might also add justice, literacy, and the environment, depending on their objectives.

Research must be conducted to discover how these categories of general relief and development can become *holistic* mission, such as (a) holistic relief, (b) holistic water, (c) holistic food, (d) holistic business, and (e) holistic health. We need to find out how people come to faith and obedience in Christ while their dire physical needs are being met.

As holistic practitioners, we must constantly keep in mind the needs of the whole person and explore how that person ultimately becomes reconciled to God.

We know very little about how people in different circumstances of need come to know Christ. I shall simply mention the categories of investigation.

Holistic relief

In 1980, I visited the Khao-I-Dang camp for Cambodian war refugees just inside the Thai border. There were 130,000 suffering people in the camp, of whom only eight families had been Christian at the beginning. But soon conversions began occurring, sometimes at the rate of hundreds a day. I witnessed the dynamic worship of believers. Within months, the Christian population of Khao-I-Dang had grown to 20,000.

The refugees were mainly women and children who had witnessed the atrocities of Pol Pot and his followers. They had barely survived the minefields. They were separated from their loved ones. They had lost husbands, parents, and children. They were malnourished and ill. Their hopes were dashed and they were in despair. Christian relief workers not only attended to their physical needs but also simply provided loving care. This was ministry to the whole person. Many Cambodians in utter despair turned to Christ.

Holistic water

Polluted water kills 3 million children each year. People without clean drinking water suffer from diarrhea and related illnesses. Responding to this great need, some Christian water specialists I know of share the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well in Sychar and explain the meaning of “living water.”

Holistic food

Larry Ward, founder of Food for the Hungry International, said that the organization shared “food for the body” and “food for the soul.” Jesus describes himself as the “bread of life.” In May 2002, Dordt College in Iowa and Food for the Hungry International are co-sponsoring a consultation on “Biblical Holism and Agriculture” to bring these two kinds of nourishment together.

Holistic business

People in business are the least utilized segment of the missions workforce. In the churches, their checkbooks are valued, but they are not. This must change for mission in the 21st century. We need holistic entrepreneurs, those who are cross-cultural business owners, called by God to do business holistically in restricted-access countries. Their goal is to share the gospel and make disciples while they start new ventures and run for-profit businesses.

Traditional tentmakers generally are job takers, and they have their place in the missions enterprise. Holistic entrepreneurs, on the other hand, are job makers. Acts 18:1–3 is the much-discussed passage authenticating tentmaking. In it we see Paul joining Aquila and Priscilla to make tents to support his ministry. In business terms, Paul was an employee of a business owned by Aquila and Priscilla, who were holistic entrepreneurs with an extensive knowledge of the Scriptures (18:24–26).

Holistic entrepreneurs incorporate “kingdom values”¹¹ into their business practice so that a model of the kingdom can be seen. Further, of course, they share the gospel and disciple new believers.

The holistic business approach deserves close examination. The Regent University Graduate School of Business, in collaboration with Lausanne Holistic Ministries, will host a Consultation for Holistic Entrepreneurs, October 3–5, 2002. The consultation will attempt to integrate “kingdom business” models with outreaches to unreached peoples in the 21st century.

2. The critical demand for holistic health care.

Recently I spent considerable time with Pastor Norman Pule of the Assembly of God Church in Soweto, South Africa. Although the community has been hard hit by the HIV/AIDS crisis, the churches are almost numb to it. AIDS patients go through various stages of (a) denial, (b) anger (at husband, God, and the pastor who represents God), (c) worry (about children and other matters), (d) rejection (from the family and people in the community), and (e) care (by the church). Some churches teach that God is punishing the AIDS-infected persons. Other churches teach

that God can heal infected people. Still other churches, such as Pastor Pule's, attempt to educate people about AIDS and care for those affected by it. Because this illness affects not only the patient but also the family and the community, people need comprehensive care. They need medical assistance, social reconciliation, psychological healing, spiritual nurture, and friends.

We need more research on the ways in which churches are dealing with this crisis. However, other areas demand attention from Christian health care practitioners, as well. In all of them, we must examine the cultural issues that affect the healing process. Christian health care professionals must do research in areas such as "Biblical Holism and Health Care," "Cultural Issues That Advance or Impede Holistic Health," "Strategies for Networking among Christian Health Practitioners," "Case Studies in Holistic Health," and "Training for Holistic Health Practitioners."

3. Insights from previous research on holistic ministry.¹²

Thankfully, we already know some factors in effective holistic ministry (involving near-neighbor outreach).

Prayer

Without prayer, nothing significant happens. We must pray every step of the way toward physical and spiritual health among the people with whom we work.

Holistic ministry concept

Evangelical relief and development organizations must have a clearly delineated concept of holistic ministry in their vision statement.

Appropriate staffing

Unless enthusiastic, vibrant, and dynamic witnessing staff members have frequent contact with non-Christians in the project community, no spiritual rebirths are likely. These staff members must be professionally qualified and conversant with the Bible.

Sociological and anthropological insights

Staff must possess accurate and culturally appropriate knowledge. They must know the sociologically and anthropologically discernible facts about the community and its people. Who are the people? What do they believe? How do they behave? What do most people do

for a living? Do they marry within the same ethnic group or do they marry outside their group? Who among the people have responded to the gospel? Then staff need to focus on responsive groups.

Respecting lines of communication

Christian staff must respect existing lines of communication. Communication is generally good between two intimates, such as relatives or friends. The gospel flows best from one member of a family to another, or between friends.

Training and outreach

Nurturing new believers is critical. They must grow in grace, increase in the knowledge of Christ, engage in holistic spiritual and physical outreach ministries, and become responsible members of their churches. Sunday school classes, small interest groups, Bible study fellowships, and church services are all part of this training.

Finding God's bridges

The late Donald McGavran, known for his church-growth thinking, used the phrase "bridges of God"¹³ to refer to the segments of society that are responsive to the gospel. We must find such people and attend to them with love and care.

4. Implications for health care practitioners

Each of these insights is applicable to holistic health. Health care practitioners must pray continually, digest the concept of biblical holism, acquire qualified staff, gain sociological and anthropological insights, respect lines of communication, nurture new converts, and find God's bridges to reach the people receptive to the gospel. In addition, every health care provider must remember that the best vehicle to dispense holistic care is through the local church.

Conclusion

We need research and frequent consultations to create a network among holistic health practitioners. Then we need to publish the resulting insights. Once we lay this groundwork, holistic health care can fulfill its increasingly strategic role in the Great Commission.

Fundamental to all I say in this article is the fact that to be fair to a holistic approach to both health and mission

we must recognize that we are not just trying to clean up something like the horrendous mess created by the collapse of the twin towers in New York. We are up against an on-going campaign of intelligent terrorists in the form of 1) diabolic delusions which enchain and destroy people and 2) diabolic disease pathogens which must be exterminated. To oppose these is to do his will on earth.

In regard to diabolic delusions, God's will and his glory is at stake when women in India are conned into being burned to death on their husbands' funeral pyres being assured that they will thereby attain a higher level in reincarnation or when in Africa the rumor is rampant that intercourse with a virgin will rid a man of AIDS. These are examples of destructive, diabolic delusions which must be opposed.

In regard to diabolic pathogens, God's will and his glory is at stake when we, in effect, bandage up the mugged and tell them to avoid dark alleys, and yet let the mugger go free. This is no different from helping sick people and telling them how they might avoid sickness, but not seeking to destroy the pathogens that are able again and again to make them sick.

That is, truly holistic effort is part of the Kingdom of God aimed ultimately at the conquest of all evil and the glorification of God by all peoples. "The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil," and "as his Father sent (him) so (he sends us)." This kind of effort is needed greatly in conventional evangelism. It is the difference between "preaching the gospel to all peoples," on the one hand, and as Jesus put it, "this gospel of the Kingdom must be advanced among all peoples." Missionaries that merely preach a gospel of getting to heaven or who merely preach a gospel of clean water both fall perilously short of biblical holism. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹John Steward, 2000 *Biblical Holism*, in A. Scott Moreau (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books), p. 448.

²Valson Thampu, 1995 *Rediscovering Mission: Towards A Non-Western Missiological Paradigm* (New Delhi: Theological Research and Communication Institute), p. 4.

³W. Dayton Roberts, 1993 *Christ's mission as concerto*, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (July), p. 301.

⁴Steward, p. 448.

⁵Bryant L. Myers, 1988 *Where are the Poor and the Lost? Together* (October–December).

⁶Dan Harrison, 1991 *Hope for the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), p. 49.

⁷Ralph D. Winter and Bruce A. Koch, 2000 “*Finishing the Task: The Unreached Peoples Challenge*,” *Mission Frontiers* (June), p. 27.

⁸Tetsunao Yamamori, 1987 *God's New Envoys: A Bold Strategy for Penetrating "Closed Countries"* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press), pp. 88–94. See also Tetsunao Yamamori, “*Furthering the Kingdom Through Relief and Development: Where and How Is It Happening?*” AERDO Occasional Paper #5. 1997.

⁹“Great Commission Christians” are defined as “active church members of all traditions who take Christ's Great Commission

seriously,” David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, 2001 “Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission: 2001” in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (January), p. 24.

¹⁰Daniel E. Fountain, 1989 *Health, the Bible and the Church* (Wheaton, IL: The Billy Graham Center), p. 1.

¹¹Two exceptional books on the topic of business and ministry are: *Just Business: Christian Ethics for the Marketplace* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997) by Alexander Hill, and *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work, and Ministry in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999) by R. Paul Stevens.

¹²From 1994 to 1997, consultations were held annually in Chiang Mai, Thailand; Harare, Zimbabwe; Quito, Ecuador; and Manila, Philippines, to gather empirical data and analyze them. The findings were reported in the series of four books: Tetsunao Yamamori, Bryant L. Myers, and David Conner (eds.), *Serving with the Poor in Asia* (1995); Tetsunao Yamamori, Bryant L. Myers, Kwame Bediako, and Larry Reed (eds.), *Serving with the Poor in Africa* (1996); Tetsunao Yamamori, Bryant L. Myers, C. Rene Padilla, and Greg Rake (eds.), *Serving with the Poor in Latin America* (1997); and Tetsunao Yamamori, Bryant L. Myers, Kenneth L. Luscombe (eds.), *Serving with the Urban Poor*.

¹³Donald A. McGavran (1970), *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), pp. 395–411.