

# A Bible Study on Serving in Health Ministry to Promote Health

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## Introduction

Australian society is concerned about health and illness. We give government a mandate to spend around 10% of Australia's annual budget on the 'health system'. We boast the latest in medical technology, but the system is largely disease focused rather than health focused. If we believe people are whole persons (body, mind, and spirit), who live in relationship to other humans (family, significant others, church family, local community, global community); the environment (natural creation and that made by humans); and God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), then health care must surely consider more than treating disease?

It is well researched that some of the causes of disease stem from personal risk taking (smoking, binge drinking, inactivity, obesity, sexual promiscuity, extreme sports etc.) or not taking enough care about nutrition, hygiene, sleep, workloads and other lifestyle issues. Some illness has its root cause in poverty, lack of education, family and community violence, war, disconnected and fragmented human relationships etc. Thus illness prevention and health promotion is also about strengthening personal and community relationships, ensuring social justice, providing education around healthy values informed by biblical principles for living, and the provision of compassionate care to those who are sick and in need. These are some tasks of our church's health ministry.

Faith community health ministries can provide activities that nurture relationships where people experience a sense of connection and belonging. They can provide a setting where faith and biblical principles provide the scaffolding upon which a value-based life can be organised. Faith communities that take seriously the call to stewardship of our environment, and our relationships with one another and with God, are in essence health promoting communities. Thus health ministry is a response to what God says in his word and the example he showed us in Jesus' ministry. The Christian church is commanded to carry on that ministry with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. It is the Christian's response to God's love. We are to present Jesus Christ to the world in word and in deed (Mark 1:14 - 45. John 17; Ephesians 4:29 1 Thessalonians 2:1-13).

Read 1 Corinthians 6:19. The Christian's body is a 'temple of the Holy Spirit'? How does this influence how you live? Are there things you should/could do? What should you not do? How are you working out these decisions? How can we help each other be more informed and develop sound values around such issues?

## Following the command to 'Go and Do Likewise'

*Read John 13:12-17* When Jesus had finished washing the disciples feet, he asked them if they understood what he had done for them. As their 'teacher' he gives them an object lesson in service and as their 'Lord' he gives them the motivation to serve. He instructs them 'as I have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.' He adds you will be blessed if you do this. In service we experience a little of what Jesus means when he asks us to 'die to ourself'. We have to get out of our comfort zone and move beyond ourselves and our own wants and needs. Health service tasks are often mundane, and done in quiet. Sometimes the tasks may be a bit challenging, or just plain ordinary.

What do you think Jesus meant by this example in John 13:12-17? Why does Jesus command us to follow his example? Could it be that in this way we learn to respect individual members of the body of Christ as equals?

I believe one reason is that when we show love, mercy and compassion to people in need, both planned (via health ministry activities) and unplanned (via spontaneous caring actions), we commune with each other in love, bringing encouragement and hope to others, which provides a

cohesive spiritual union that binds our community together with deep connections that go beyond superficial levels. This is a well researched basic need for good community health. It cannot be simulated and as a church we can provide it by cultivating servant hearts that are lived out in our words and deeds. It is very health giving to live in a loving relationship with other humans and with God. When we do our 'foot washing' we bring honor and praise to God and it is his love flowing through us to others that creates social cohesion within the community that no human can produce.

Perhaps you can think of simple ordinary acts of kindness you have done in your every day life that demonstrate 'foot washing'. If you are in a group you may wish to share some of the experiences of serving and being served. Is it harder to receive the blessing of service, or to give it? Why? It does feel good to do something caring for someone else. Is there a danger in doing acts of kindness for the way they make us feel? Is it possible to have the wrong motivation in our desire to do good? (See Romans 7:21ff).

Examining our motivation for serving is important and it will be helpful to read Matthew 25:31-40. What does it say about the relationship between faith and our acts of kindness?

Read Matthew 20:25-28; Luke 12:45-47 John 12:25-26; Romans 12:1, 2 Timothy 4:6 and Philippians 2:1-8, 25-30. What do they tell us about motivation to serve and how we should serve?

C.S. Lewis is quoted as saying "*It is easier to pray for a bore than to visit him.*" What do you think he meant? How do you deal with challenging people?

Some people are difficult to serve. Sometimes we serve under hard task masters, or we may have peculiar co-workers in our team, or ungrateful recipients of care. The actions of such people can deliver a body blow to your enthusiasm and motivation to keep ministering. Being a servant brings life's highest highs and lowest lows. It may help to distinguish between choosing to serve and choosing to be a servant. Mother Teresa said, "I belong to Jesus. He must have the right to use me without consulting me." If we chose to serve we decide what we will and won't do and when and how we will do it. That sounds reasonable enough but, if you are a servant of God, he becomes your master. That means you relinquish control over the who, how, when, where and what of your service. It is liberating, but it requires surrender and the willingness to become available with your time and talents. You become vulnerable and dependent on the Holy Spirit for the gifts and the capacity you need to do your ministry. You no longer serve in your own capacity. You are then less likely to fear serving. You lose the need to discriminate between people, rather you start seeing people with the eyes of love as Jesus would see them. This is a blessing many of us miss out on because we struggle with surrender within our serving. (Note this does not mean we do not need to coordinate ministry and share work around in an organised manner, it simply means we look to God to envision us, empower and enable us to do His will.

Is there an area in your service which you need to hand over to God? Discuss ways we can help one another with this? Make this a point of prayer.

Read Mark 9:35 What does Jesus mean by 'last' and 'servant of all'? Becoming a servant is not becoming a slave, nor a doormat for people to walk over. How can we ensure our church's servants are acknowledged, protected and equipped? What can you do to help others and yourself?

Read Galatians 6:20 What does it mean to 'carry a burden'? How can we 'carry' one another's burdens in helpful ways? What are we doing as a church community? What are you doing specifically? What more could you do?

### **Caring for the marginalised**

Marginalisation is a subtle social process of excluding people who we believe are threatening, or undesirable to our group, or community. These people are often given labels that are demeaning based on race, gender, disease, capacity etc. We commence the process by avoiding such people and then actively isolating them with excluding behaviours. Let's take HIV-AIDS as an example. Consider these staggering statistics from the UN: '25 million people have died of AIDS since 1981. Africa has 12 million AIDS orphans. Young people (15-24 years old) account for half of all new HIV

infections worldwide - more than 6,000 become infected with HIV every day. Of the 6.5 million people in developing countries who need life-saving AIDS drugs, only 1 million are receiving them' (<http://www.avert.org/worldstats.htm>). We have a Christian responsibility to them.

### ***Exclusion and Jesus' response:***

Read John 9:1-7. What 3 stigmatising labels were given to the blind man? The disciples believed there was a connection between his blindness, sin and punishment, so they commenced their excluding responses (see Ezekiel 18:20 and Exodus 20:5). Is there any similarity between how the blind man was treated and a person living in Adelaide with HIV may be treated? What about someone living with mental illness in our own church family? What was Jesus' response to the blind man (vv3-7)? In v4 who is the "we" Jesus is referring to? What does that mean for us today? Is ministry to the sick still a part of the church's ministry? What is stopping the modern church from continuing this ministry? Are there things we can do about this in our faith community?

### ***The response of the community:***

Read John 9:8-13. Do you think the blind man had much contact with his neighbours? They certainly didn't appear to be rejoicing with him. How are people with HIV isolated in our community? What religious reasons do people give to condone such isolating behaviours? Are there similarities for people living with mental illness within our faith community?

Read vv14-17. What was the Pharisees response? On what grounds might a Pharisee exclude someone with HIV, if they were in our faith community today?

If a prominent person in our church leadership were diagnosed with HIV, what would your response be? What are your fears? How close would you get to them and their family? One woman in this predicament reveals "People said 'I'll pray for you', but they kept right away until I left of my own accord. Problem solved!" Would the family of this person feel able to say they needed help? How much does fear of other people's reactions contribute to the isolation and stigmatisation that accompany certain diseases/conditions? In verses 23-34 we see more systematic exclusion taking place. Think of other relevant examples where we may be excluding people within our own faith community? What healing and loving response could we demonstrate in such situations?

### ***Love breaks through—inclusion through Christ:***

Read vv35-38. In verse 35 we see that Jesus actively searched for the man. What should our response be to the marginalised? Christ's healing is always for a purpose, to restore people into relationships, especially with God. What does this tell us about our healing responses to a person with HIV, or mental illness? How can we check our stigmatising and labelling behaviours as individuals and a faith community? Consider access to programs, support, language we use, subtle excluding behaviours, words that are not matched by actions etc. Make a plan to improve responses to the marginalised in our community. Action it!

End your study time in prayer for each other and our faith community. Ask God to envision, empower and enable us with his love, as we go to serve each other and the community in which we are placed, sharing his love in word and deed.

### ***In conclusion, remember the words of 1 Peter 4:10-11***

*Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.'*

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(This study was prepared for use of small groups in my faith community)