



To Your Health!

British psychiatrist and pastoral theologian Frank Lake once said in conversation that the psalms were the pastoral counseling tools of the Jerusalem temple. In his impressive *Clinical Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966) Lake writes that in times of depression “the Holy Spirit will use [the psalms] for us, as He used them for the Son of God Himself, as a revelation of the Face of God and the Word of God, the mothering and fathering of the eternal Source of Being” (186-7). Again: “The Holy Spirit is a clinical pastoral counsellor in private to many Christians as they read and reflect on the Scripture under His guidance” (47).

Lake understood what many pastors and counselors are struggling to relearn or reaffirm, namely, that the Christian message itself—proclaiming the Word of God, offering sacramental grace, and calling to community and holiness—is the church’s primary resource in its concern for the mental health of human beings.

Caring and conversation, sensitivity and support, therapy and tough love are elements of healing which will be employed by Christians and non-Christians alike. Pastoral caregivers will seek to promote these things within the Christian community and will also form alliances with other individuals or agencies who do them well and will refer their parishioners to these people when needed. But the church cannot refer its primary responsibility and vocation: the offer of divine grace.

People hungry for meaning and mental health still seek help from the church, just as the hungry crowds sought help from Jesus. Like the disciples, the church has often sent the seekers away—“into the villages [to] buy food for themselves” (Matt 14:15). Gerhard von Rad reminds us that we have “done that just where the comfort of God was very near and would have offered a special promise” (*Predigten* [Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1972] 131; my translation). In matters of mental health, too, we need to learn not only when to refer but when to say, with Jesus, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat” (Matt 14:16).

The articles in this issue revolve around these questions: What is the church’s ministry toward mental health? How does it best perform this ministry in concert with the broader mental health community?

Writing in the Perspectives section, *Gary Harbaugh* suggests that pastoral counseling and pastoral counselors are not everywhere the same. We must recognize and use the unique personality characteristics of both counselor and counselee to arrive at a healing dialogue that is both effective and faithful.

Roland Martinson addresses the question which gave rise to the theme of this issue within the Editorial Board. He rejects the view that either couch (therapy) or confessional (forgiveness and pastoral care) has a monopoly on the claim to provide what humans need to be

well. He offers a cooperative model which takes seriously the mutual contributions of the mental health community and the church. *Herbert Anderson* proposes that we view a congregation more as a community of healing than as a drop-in center to provide individual mental health. He discusses how a congregation should think of itself and what it might do to become such a healing resource. *Alan Tjelteit* reminds us that “mental health” is not a value-neutral term, which means that pastors and other Christians, while cooperating with mental health professionals, will also exercise judgment in referrals: Is the proposed counselor’s view of health compatible with the gospel or not?

In an essay that parallels his 1982 article in this journal on “Health and Healing in the Bible,” *Daniel Simundson* draws on his experience in counseling and his work in biblical studies to present an overall picture of how the Bible contributes to our understanding of mental health. Then *Stewart Govig* poignantly describes his own experience with his mentally ill son. His story becomes a prophetic voice, calling church and society to respond more effectively to mental illness and inviting us all to greater understanding and empathy.

Melvin Kimble provides insights into the process of aging and the fact of being old; his observations will assist the pastor and counselor in ministering to or with the increasing number of elderly in the American population. Finally, *Jerry Robbins* uses the writings of Pascal and James to defend the notion that there are practical benefits from belief. He does not believe that such a prudential stance necessarily marks a theologically or psychologically unhealthy faith.

The nature of the church’s response to world hunger is an issue in many denominations. In *Face to Face* *John Halvorson* and *Russell Saltzman* disagree on the legitimacy of advocacy by corporate church structures. Next in the Resources section, *Laura Nelson* wonders how the message of comfort in Second Isaiah might be addressed to an old woman exiled to a nursing home. Her reflection on the meaning of life and the shape of ministry is a moving testimony to the truth of the prophet’s assertion that the Word does not return empty. Last, in our Texts in Context essay, *Craig Koester* offers an overview of the Epistle to the Galatians, making clear that the unconditional gospel of freedom is precisely that which gives us the opportunity to do good. The article focuses on the passages chosen as first lessons for the Second through Seventh Sundays after Pentecost.

We offer this issue to you with the traditional toast: “To your health!”

F.J.G.