

## In Sickness and in Health by Karen Kogler

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"In sickness and in health." In marriage, it can be a challenge to love and care for a spouse who is sick. Perhaps it's the opposite challenge in our church family.

When someone is seriously ill, when tragedy strikes, the church family rallies. Pastor visits, the care committee kicks into action, people bring food and send cards and ask how they can help. This is how it should be within the body of Christ, where "its parts should have equal concern for each other" (I Cor. 12:25).

But most of us, most of the time, are not sick or grieving. How do we love and care and have equal concern for each other in the church in times of health?

Jesus spoke of his mission to people in terms of sickness and health. "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31-32). It is only as we recognize our need, our sin disease that only Christ can cure, that we, by His Spirit, turn to Him in repentance and receive Him through Word and Sacrament.

With the spiritual health and wholeness he gives us, we reach out to unbelieving people who are spiritually broken, hurting, and sick, who realize their need, and we introduce them to our Great Physician. It is not easy. Much time, patience and wisdom might be required, building trust and respect so that our message will be heard.

Yet the majority of unbelievers do not acknowledge their need. Most Americans see themselves as independent, self-sufficient consumers who select the philosophy or religion that currently suits their preference. These, too, are neighbors we are to love. But introducing them to Christ is harder because their presumed spiritual health closes their ears to the message.

When we in the church care for each other in health, as well as in sickness, we acknowledge the greatness and the urgency of the task God has given us. The Holy Spirit alone converts the heart, yet we are commanded to "go and make disciples" (Matt. 28:19), to be his "witnesses" (Acts 1:8), and to be "ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us" (2 Cor. 5:20). These are challenging, difficult tasks, as the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh pull us away from them and make them even more difficult.

But just as we in the church care and support each other through times of sickness, in our times of health and energy we care for and support each other in the carrying out of these God-given tasks.

Through worship, Word and Sacrament prepare us for the week's work. From the pulpit, as the Gospel proclaimed is proclaimed, we are motivated and challenged to get out of our comfortable ruts, and we are given help for our labor. In Bible studies, we apply God's word to our situations, sharing our stories, being encouraged and challenged and held accountable by fellow believers. Council and committees consider community needs and opportunities. The church helps members find places in ministry, and supports them as they carry it out. Pastor, staff and leaders "prepare God's people for works of service" (Eph. 4:12). The whole church culture draws people in to respond to Christ's "Follow me" (Matt. 4:19).

Without intending to, an article in the May 15, 2005 Chicago Tribune describes one way Christians bring Jesus both to society's "sick" and "healthy." The article is about Frank and Kay Fennell, a suburban couple who have spent every Thursday night for the past 16 years delivering food from the trunk of their car to homeless men and women in the "subterranean gloom" off lower level streets in downtown Chicago. The article relates the hope expressed by those who receive the meals, along with "a whole host of what they call the Miracle Stories."

One time Kay realized they didn't have enough food for all the people who appeared at their last stop. As she handed out what she had, she prayed, telling God, "We need more food." Right then someone walked up and handed them two huge pizzas from Giordano's, a quality pizza chain in the Chicago area. Kay relates, "Everyone shouted, 'Thank God.' And I'm thinking, 'That's right.'"

The article concludes with another quote from Kay and the writer's personal observation. "'There've been nights where we served 46 with food for 30. We didn't even realize the food was multiplying.' She shakes her head and sighs, 'It's so biblical.' Hmmm. She's not the only one who noticed."

Even the self-proclaimed "healthy" people in the world notice the actions of Christians, for better or for worse. They might not be impressed that we go to church, or volunteer for church activities. But they do notice actions of love that go beyond the usual.

When a body is healthy, when all the parts are present and in good working order, the body goes to work. It gets its work done. Each healthy part of the body of Christ contributes to the work of the whole, both within and beyond the church walls. And we do more of these challenging tasks, and we do them better, as we receive the love, care and concern of our fellow parts of the body. ■