

Spiritual leadership in health

Primary health care is a people's movement. The leaders are ordinary people with human and spiritual values, who can move their communities towards the goal of health and a full life

by Eric R. Ram

Since 1978, the Christian Medical Commission (CMC) has pursued a study programme helping churches all over the world to reach a deeper Christian understanding of health, healing and wholeness. On the basis of wisdom gathered from people in all walks of life and many different cultures, the CMC has come to believe that health is based on harmony with one's self, with one's neighbours, with nature and with God. It depends on the physical, mental, spiritual, economic, political and social well-being of a person. We have learned that there is an inseparable unity of body, mind and spirit, and that disturbance in the harmonious relations of these factors can cause ill-health.

The wise leader models spiritual behaviour and lives in harmony with spiritual values. There is a way of knowing, higher than reason; there is a self, greater than egocentricity. The leader demonstrates the power of selflessness and the unity of all creation.

from *The Tao of Leadership*
by Lao Tzu

Science has concentrated on healing the bodies of men and, with the development of modern psychology, doctors have come to recognise that sickness of the mind can also be treated. And yet the spiritual dimension of man is difficult for medicine to deal with, since precise measurement of the invisible aspects of spiritual sickness or

health is impossible. Spiritual illness may be expressed in feelings of emptiness, loneliness, violence, greed, or general meaninglessness of life. These may be indicators of broken relationships with man and with God.

It is not always easy to distinguish between spiritual and psychological problems, yet psychologists frequently recognise that they are dealing with more than "mental illness." The spiritual dimension may have to be experienced before it has much meaning, although it is usually the missing ingredient in the search for wholeness.

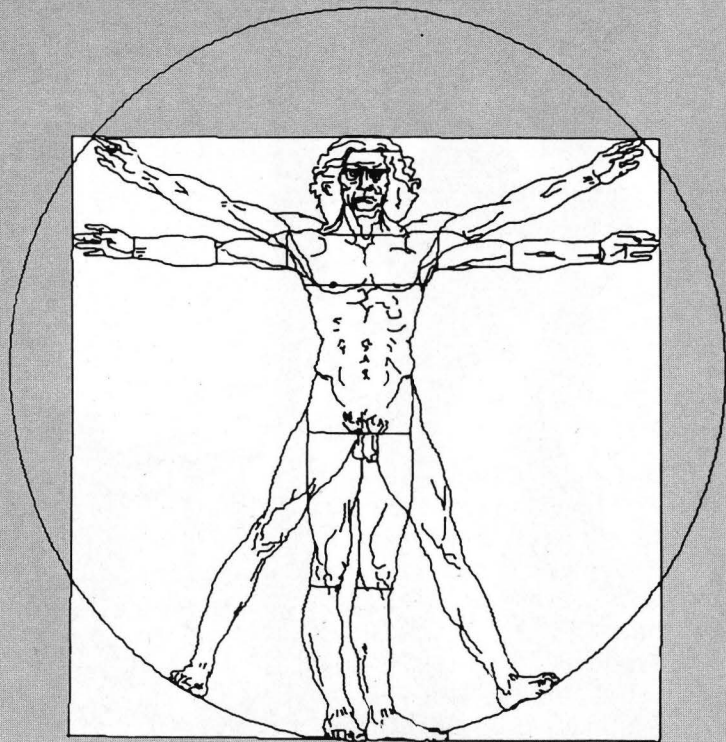
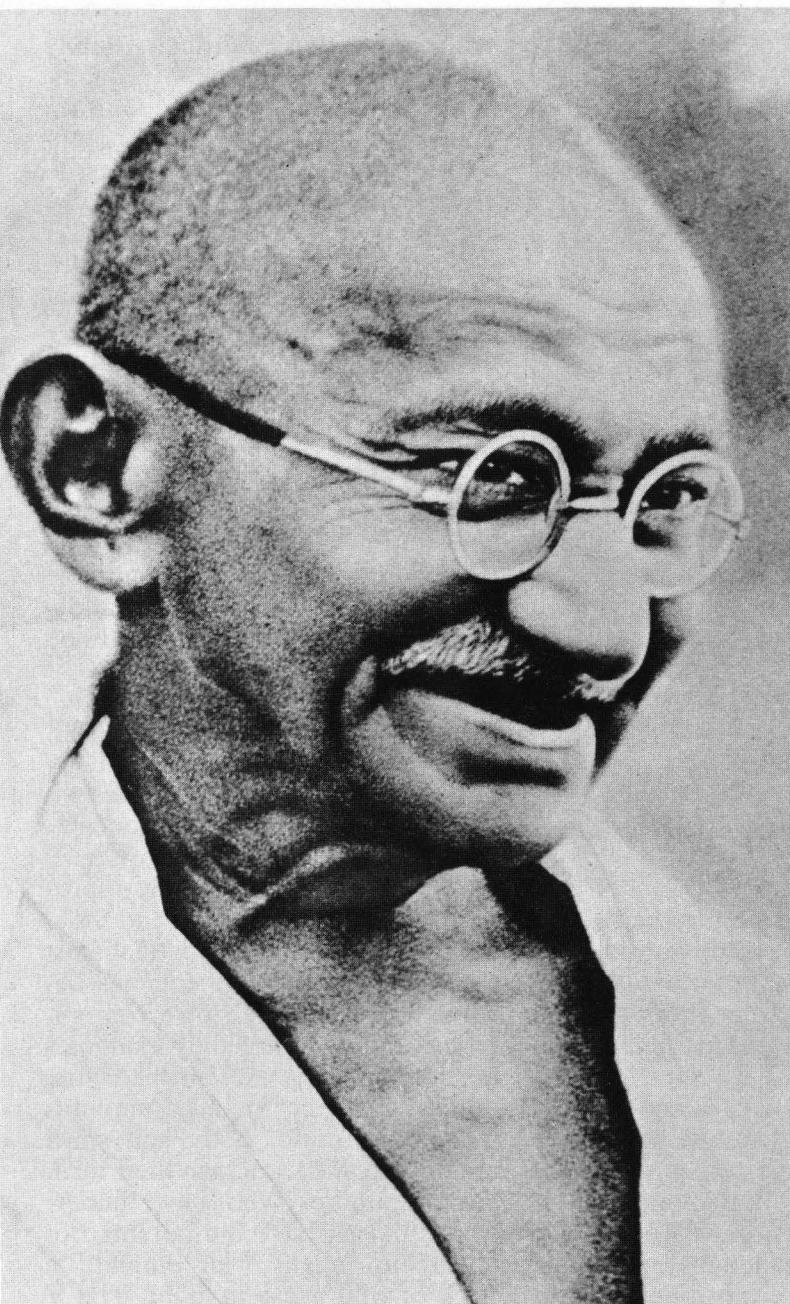
It demands a special relationship between the doctor and the patient. It can be argued that *both* are, to some extent, sick and in need of healing, and that the idea that one is well and the other is sick is only illusory. Therefore, it requires an empathy between them.

An increasing volume of medical literature is recognising the close relationship between the body and the mind or spirit, and is reporting exciting results. Dr Bernie Siegel, an oncologist and surgeon at Yale University, reports that he was very discouraged at the high surgical failure rate that was usual among cancer patients, so he began listening to them. Over a period of years, he found that patients, given an opportunity to talk about their feelings and broken relationships, often discovered for themselves that they were in effect committing suicide. Then most patients either found another way to deal with



A health team meets with village leaders in West Bengal.

Photo WHO



Man in the Round, as Leonardo da Vinci saw him in the fifteenth century. In our own times, Mahatma Gandhi too believed that man is an indivisible whole, and of his own supporters in India he said: "I am their leader, I had better follow them."

Photo L. Sirman ©

problems and experienced complete resolution of their cancer, or they reaffirmed their desire for life to end and expired rapidly. The basis for the Christian belief in the spirituality of man is biblical. In the Bible we read over and over again that there is nothing in the created world which is unrelated to God: whether it be matter, body or spirit, it is still of His creation. The book of Genesis tells us that spirit comes directly from God; it means the "vitality of the flesh" and man himself becomes a spirit. When he dies he is a "dead spirit."

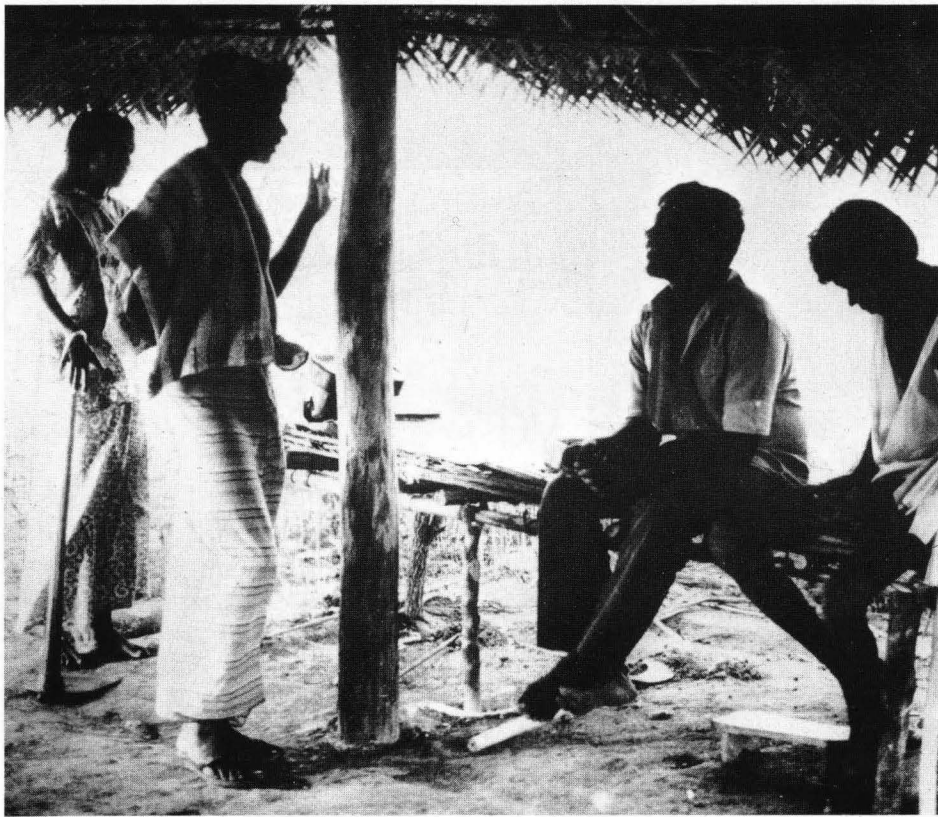
Non-Christians, too, have recognised the essential unity of creation. One of the guiding principles of Mahatma Gandhi's *satyagraha* (non-violent resistance), was based on his belief that man is an indi-

visible whole. He affirmed that even man's actions cannot be neatly compartmentalised. Albert Einstein's theory of relativity maintained that the universe is one single whole. If any one part of the universe is affected, the rest of the universe is affected too.

What difference does this make to the practice of medicine? It calls for recognition that each person is a part of God's creation, unique in one sense, and yet shaped by the community of which each is a part, so that individual and community can never be separated. Since all are of God's creation, all belong together. A refugee woman eating her heart out in loneliness and frustration represents all the unresolved tensions of our world, just like the boy with his needle on

some Harlem rooftop, or a man in the Sudan quivering for want of chloroquine. No one can be fully healthy living in a sick society.

Early practitioners of healing arts understood man as a whole being, whose body, spirit and mind were not separate. For them, all symptoms of disease affected the whole person. A deep change occurred in the 19th century when medicine allied itself with the natural sciences. Advances in science and technology have led to rapid perfecting of diagnostic, therapeutic and rehabilitative skills. Modern medicine is able to transplant organs, replace joints and prolong life. In the process, however, the close relationship between doctor and patient has given way to depersonalised, sophisticated technology.



Discussing the villagers' needs in Sri Lanka. "No one can be fully healthy living in a sick society."

Photo WHO/A. T. Ariyaratne

We used to believe that more doctors and more hospitals would result in better health. As we look at today's world, we see that although health care is necessary, most disease stems from such factors as poverty, poor housing, lack of safe drinking water, malnutrition, illiteracy, loneliness or isolation. Modern health problems point to the need to recognise the unity of mind, body and spirit, and the essential unity of the universe. Just as man is a product of his total environment, *dis-ease* is a product of the whole man. We desperately need a new approach to health and healing in order to deal with it.

Despite the wonders of modern medicine, we see that certain fundamental diseases of today's society have not been cured because the best medicines of the best institutions are not capable of listening, caring, touching and loving. These are human attributes and only humans can provide them. It is this dimension of human care that is so important in healing. Dr Paul Tournier called it the "third dimension of medicine." Loving and car-

ing involves one's entire being, the sharing of one's self with others. It requires humility, a continuous learning about the other person while respecting his or her human dignity.

Loss of self-worth and human dignity, and abdication of personality, have become major causes of unhappiness in most of the world. Those people who are able to face up to these challenges and move beyond them are those people who are possessed of the spiritual flame of faith, hope, love and zeal, a flame which burns brightly within them in the face of adversity, despite all odds.

Within every person is a latent energy, normally dormant. This energy has to be activated and then developed slowly and gradually. Once this "inner flame" reaches its efflorescence, one possesses amazing strength and power, far beyond that of ordinary people. People are not born with special power that marks them out for leadership. Leaders are made, not born. Take for example Saint Peter, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, or Mother Teresa—all were ordinary people at the beginning of their lives. Each of them had failures and serious problems. Peter betrayed his responsibility three times and ran away. Gandhi was an average,

ordinary child in an ordinary family who grew up to be called "Mahatma," great spirit. We can affirm that there is the energy and potential to be a leader in every person. The potential has to be enhanced and the energy released.

The leaders cited above all cultivated attributes of spirituality that gave them strength when they needed it. They exemplify the idea of health as a balance of the physical, mental and spiritual. They hold the flame of faith in their hearts and are able to pass it on to others. As leaders, they are in direct touch with those they try to help, and they hold themselves accountable to the people. As Mahatma Gandhi once said: "I am their leader, I had better follow them."

Such leaders are available in communities all over the world. They need to be energised by others who can pass along the vision of health as a total concept, not just as freedom from disease. Ordinary people who develop spiritual and human values and hold them as a source of strength against the onslaught of their enemies become leaders in their own communities. Not only are they examples of health, they are able to free others to search for a harmonious balance of mind, body and spirit and to become leaders in their turn.

Communities who have understood that all have the potential of leadership might well emulate a flock of wild geese in flight. The V formation enables each bird, except the leader, to find an uplift in the slipstream created by the bird ahead of it. The lead bird quickly tires and its place is then taken by another while it moves back along the line to recover. Flying in formation, the birds can travel almost twice as far as a single bird alone. If, for any reason, one of the birds must descend to the ground, another will accompany it in order to help and support it. Sharing and caring are important elements in collective leadership.

Primary health care has to do with people and it is a people's movement. What we need for leadership are the ordinary people with human and spiritual values—people who can help move their communities towards the attainment of the goal of health and fullness of life. ■