The relationship of theology to health

Well-being within a religious tradition is not gauged by the absence of illness, anxiety or distress, but by the presence of God-in-relationship. Human flourishing for religious believers is not determined primarily by health. The primary criterion for religious believers is spiritual.

J. Swinton (First Annual Meeting of the Society for Spirituality, Theology and Health, 2008)
Research as practical theology

- Practical Theology

*Critical, theological reflection on the practices of the church as they interact with practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful practice.*

– J. Swinton

Theology from two perspectives

- **Theology from above** (starting with “sacred text”) is the story of God seeking relationship with humanity.

- **Theology from below** (starting with “narrative”) is the story of human beings seeking relationship with God.

Both perspectives are important for understanding health as an important expression of wholeness in life with God, in community.
Health

Freedom from sickness: physical, psychological, social or moral deficits

- Malfunctioning of the organ systems of the body
- Shaking of personal confidence
- Loss of social contact
- Loss of life energies with concomitant loss of hope to complete life projects.

J. Moltmann

Health

- Health is the strength to be human. It is vitality for life, the desire and capacity to live in the presence of changing circumstances: sickness and physical health, suffering and happiness, grief and joy, confronting the realities of aging and death.

–Jürgen Moltmann

This is health more as an attitude rather than a state.
Theology from above

May he strengthen you, in his glorious might, with ample power to meet whatever comes with fortitude, patience and joy; and to give thanks to the Father who has made you fit to share the heritage of God’s people in the realm of light.

Colossians 1:11-12

Theology from below

Sharing stories can enlarge the health of the community as strength (including its courage, patience, faith) to face the unknown as fully human beings (in the context of the realities of human life and death).
Theology from below

- The community reflects on what they’ve heard and its significance for themselves, sharing insights within smaller group discussions.

- This shared knowledge or practical wisdom can work to increase the health of the community.

Research in ophthalmology (AMD)

- Patients’ assessment by questionnaires-NEI VFQ-25 or SF-36 (“subjective”)

- Physicians’ assessment by letters read from an ETDRS eye chart (“objective”)

- Physicians’ assessment by fluorescein angiography-FA or optical coherence tomography-OCT (“hard endpoints”)
Assessing health of the community

- Does the community display a vital love for God and love for one another?
- Is the community actively doing good works? Does it bring these works to fruition?
- Does the community exhibit courage and perseverance doing God’s will?
- Is the community faithful to the teachings of the Apostles and to the commands of Christ?
- Is the community listening to what the Spirit is saying to God’s people?
  Revelation 2-3

Conclusion

A theological perspective brings wholeness to the concept of health as an attitude toward life that is more than just an ideal state of well-being.

A theological perspective is relevant to appreciation of human beings as created for life in the presence of God and assessing health in this context.
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