

HEALING

EMPOWERING, TRANSFORMING AND RECONCILING ACT OF GOD^{*}

The dawn of the 21st century is marked by growing uncertainty and anxiety. The world in which we live is broken, a world dominated by evil forces that are generating a culture of violence and hopelessness. The signs of the times are clear: the AIDS pandemic, the genocide in Sudan, the tsunami disaster in Southeast Asia – to give a few examples. Conflict, poverty and injustice have deepened the anguish and despair of many societies. The world is in desperate need of healing in almost all spheres of human life. Therefore, for this last meeting of the Central Committee, I want to focus our reflection on healing. As you know, the forthcoming conference on World Mission and Evangelism (9-16 May, 2005, Athens) will have as its theme, "Come Holy Spirit, Heal and Reconcile: Called in Christ to be Reconciling and Healing Communities". I hope that this report and ensuing discussion will contribute to the deliberations of the conference.

The renewed concern and awareness towards healing in a new world context raises for the churches fundamental theological, missiological, ethical and pastoral questions that require critical scrutiny. My approach will be missiological. I will discuss healing as the *transforming, empowering* and *reconciling* missionary action of the church.

REDISCOVERING THE CHURCH'S MINISTRY OF HEALING

Healing belongs to the very *esse* of the church. The church is endowed by God's grace and power of healing. Hence, the prevailing missiological misconception that considers healing a "specialized ministry" of the church and neglects it as a core element needs to be corrected by an ecclesiological understanding that perceives healing to be integral to the church's being, manifested through its sacramental life, diaconal action and evangelistic outreach.

1. JESUS CHRIST: THE GREAT HEALER OF ALL TIMES

- a. ***Healing is rooted in God's revelation.*** Both in the Old and New Testaments God has revealed Himself as a healer. Sickness is perceived as the brokenness of the relationship with God; it is estrangement from God. Healing is found in the restoration of the right relationship with God. Most of Jesus' miracles are miracles of healing. Healing is an essential dimension of Christ's mission and a concrete manifestation of His redemptive work. It is a sign and anticipation of the eschatological breaking in of the Kingdom of God (Lk. 10: 9) and participation in God's Kingdom, which will reach its consummation in parousia. Christ gave His disciples the ministry of healing: heal the sick, raise the dead, clean lepers, cast out demons; the Kingdom of God has come near to you (Mt. 10: 1, 5, 7, Lk. 9: 1-2, 10: 9). Healing became a vital component of the mission of the early church (Acts 3: 1-10, 9:12, 17, 18, 32-5; 14: 19-20; 20: 7-12). In the later centuries, however, due to historical circumstances, healing lost much of its significance in the life and witness of the church.
- b. ***Growing awareness towards healing.*** We have been witnessing a resurgence of healing ministry of the church. Anguish and despair stemming from ecological disorder, economic injustice and increasing violence, as well as

experiences of scandalous and unexplainable suffering, have given rise to a growing concern for healing. According to estimates, four to five million pilgrims visit Lourdes each year to seek healing. We see the same phenomenon expressed in manifold ways in different parts of the world. Increasingly, healing cults and grass roots movements are emerging within Christianity to seek healing through different forms of spirituality. These movements are sometimes cross confessional and even syncretistic. The churches have re-entered the field of healing with renewed awareness of its crucial importance for the life and mission of the church. Many churches and ecumenical organizations have established special programmes and task forces to address various aspects and implications of healing.

- c. ***Healing: an ecumenical concern.*** Healing has been a permanent missionary priority. The history of mission has been enriched by the many initiatives taken by missionaries in their attempt to take the Gospel to all corners of the globe. Healing has also been integral to the ecumenical agenda from the very inception of the modern ecumenical movement. The Edinburgh Conference (1910), the following missionary conferences, as well as the WCC assemblies and several major ecumenical consultations have raised the issue on a larger or smaller scale. It must be noted that in the ecumenical movement healing was mainly considered as part of the churches' "medical missions", in a perspective linked to western cultures. In the Tübingen consultation (1964) the issues of community and "primary health care" came to the forefront and were linked to mission. Tübingen also emphasized the holistic nature and global scope of the church's healing ministry. It was followed by Tübingen II (1967), which established the Christian Medical Commission (CMC) within the programmatic structure of the WCC. For more than two decades, the CMC played a significant role in reminding the churches of the crucial importance of healing for the mission of the church and by challenging them to take it more seriously.

2. FROM FUNCTIONAL TO ONTOLOGICAL CONCEPT OF HEALING

- a. ***Healing is of a sacramental nature.*** It is a gift (charisma) of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12: 7-11) that the church exercises through baptism, chrismation, ordination and holy unction. The eucharist is a sacrament of healing. Through it, Christ is proclaimed as the Healer of the world, and the church, the living body of Christ, becomes a healing community and incorporates the whole creation into communion with God. Diakonia is the healing action of the eucharistic community. The therapy that the church experiences and proclaims in the eucharist must result in a therapy for the whole world. Through its missionary engagement, the church's healing diakonia (the sharing of God's healing and life-giving love) reaches out for the entire humanity and creation. The diakonia of the church in this comprehensive sense goes beyond the activities of "diaconal" institutions. The church fulfils its being and vocation when it becomes a healing community - a loving, praying, sharing, serving, proclaiming, empowering and reconciling community (Lk. 22: 27). Each of these dimensions and forms of the church's mission, along with spirituality, have a profound role in healing. It sustains and articulates the healing act of the church. Prayer has a therapeutic impact. God's healing power is revealed as a response to prayer.
- b. ***Integration of spirituality and medicine.*** In the Old Testament healing refers to all aspects of a person's life. It is the restoration of the wholeness of body,

mind and spirit. While physical healing was an important part of Christ's healing ministry, His ultimate concern was total healing aimed at salvation. The health of the human body is important since it channels God's grace, but healing is not merely physical curing; it embraces the whole person, all aspects, dimensions and manifestations of life. Therefore, physical and spiritual healing are closely interconnected. We must have a holistic approach to healing. Pastoral and spiritual care must accompany institutional and medical care. The dichotomy between the spiritual and medical aspects of healing needs to be overcome, and "scientific healing" and "divine healing" must be integrated. The holistic approach to healing is a move in the right direction. Through its rich spirituality and holistic vision, Christianity can make a vital contribution to scientific healing.

- c. ***One ministry, but different forms.*** How does the church fulfil its healing ministry? The manifold methods and means by which healing is practised in the church has varied from time to time, and from context to context. Generally the Orthodox and Catholic Churches consider healing to be inseparable from the spirituality of the church, with particular emphasis on liturgy, images, icons and pilgrimages. The churches of the Protestant tradition insist, rather, on the importance of personal counselling and confession. Both the Catholic and Protestant traditions have been influenced in the last century by the charismatic movements. In recent years some of the churches have produced excellent papers on the healing ministry. Besides the biblical and liturgical traditions, the indigenous cultural norms and forms too play a significant role in the churches' exercise of healing ministry. This particular area has not been sufficiently addressed in the ecumenical movement. It deserves serious discussion. Healing is an integral part of the collective priesthood of the church, where every Christian has a healing ministry, and, within this framework, the ordained ministry has a special function and vocation.
- d. ***Healing and justice are interrelated.*** What do we mean by healing? The healing power of God is at work where and when the church provides care to the sick and expresses its solidarity with the oppressed. Not only did Christ heal the sick, He also embraced the poor; not only did He identify Himself with the oppressed, He also took a firm stand against injustice. Healing necessarily includes the prophetic witness of the church. The church's healing ministry must not be understood solely by medical service or pastoral counselling. It implies social diakonia, working for justice, giving hope to the depressed, providing reconciliation to the alienated and liberation to the marginalized. Besides medical treatment, healing means addressing the root causes of injustice. The church loses its identity and credibility, its *raison d'être*, if it does not understand itself as God's healing community and agent, committed to His transforming, empowering and reconciling mission in the power of the Holy Spirit.

HEALING AS TRANSFORMING

The healing that Christ performed (which was beyond physical cure) was ultimately aimed at transforming and recreating humanity and creation by establishing a new quality of relationship between God, humanity and creation. Healing as transformation implies:

1. AFFIRMATION OF LIFE

- a. ***Healing is the beginning of a new life in Christ.*** Life in its "fullness", the "abundant" life, the "eternal life" was incarnated in Christ. The transformation of "all things", whether on earth or in heaven (Col. 1: 20), towards the fullness of life began in Christ: "I have come that they might have life, and that they might have it abundantly" (Jn. 10:10). All life is from God. The healing of life too is from God; He is the ultimate source of healing. The Orthodox prayer describes God as "the physician of our souls and bodies". The Christ-event is the transformation of life and the inauguration of a new life (Col. 3: 9-10). This is, indeed, the aim of healing. Life is a gift of God and healing is the sign of rebirth of life: "Behold I make everything new" (Rev. 21:5).
- b. ***Healing is the restoration of the brokenness of life.*** Life in its human and ecological dimensions and manifestations was broken due to human sin. Life apart from its Creator is broken, distorted. Christ came to repair the integrity and restore the quality of life. Therefore, healing is essentially recreation. It is recovery and rediscovery of life's wholeness, coherence and unity, and its re-orientation towards a new eschatological future through Jesus Christ. The transformation and recreation of creation and humanity took place on the cross; the resurrection completed it.
- c. ***Healing is the recovery of life's wholeness.*** Wholeness is an essential feature of biblical anthropology and the understanding of life (Gen. 2: 7, 1 Thes. 5: 23, Rm. 12: 1-2, Jn. 5: 1-15). Healing is the restoration of the whole that was disrupted, disintegrated and disoriented. In the Orthodox Church, confession is made for the sins of spirit, mind and body as one whole, and healing is granted to all sins pertaining to these different components of human life. Unlike the rationalistic perception of the Enlightenment, the eastern theological and philosophical approach to human person and generally to life is holistic. The over-privatization of religion on the one hand, and compartmentalization of medical sciences on the other hand, caused us to lose the wholeness of healing. In its definition of healing, the World Health Organization emphasizes the critical importance of wholeness. The WCC's Christian Medical Commission too maintains a holistic approach to healing, considering it "a dynamic state of the wellbeing of the individual and society, of physical, mental, spiritual, economic, political and social well-being; of being in harmony with each other, with the material environment and with God".ⁱ Christian theology must challenge any dualistic and compartmentalizing approach, and promote a holistic vision of life and healing.
- d. ***Healing is returning life to its original source.*** Healing does not mean merely normalization of the function of a particular organ. It means the sanctification of life by rediscovering its authenticity and quality as created in the likeness of God. Alienation from God is the rejection of God's gift of life and the exposure to sin and death. Life-destroying forces and life-altering values surround us today with different names and forms. The very fabric of life is threatened; it is threatened morally, spiritually, physically and ecologically. It is only with Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit that life is restored to its original nature and dignity. The healing ministry of the church must primarily affirm the sacredness of life as God's gift, and challenge Christians to commit themselves to a quality of life that reflects the values of the Gospel. Healing is caring for life. It is an invitation to turn to God, to "repent and believe the gospel" (Mk. 1: 15), the source of true life.

2. LIBERATION FROM SIN

- a. ***Healing is rediscovery of authentic humanity.*** Healing in its holistic understanding does not only involve the disappearance of physical diseases. It also liberates the person from physical, mental and spiritual evils. Those who approached Christ were sinners, oppressed and persecuted. The healing granted by Christ transformed their lives by liberating them from their physical, spiritual and moral brokenness and from the rule of evil and sin (Mk. 5: 34, Lk. 7: 50). Therefore, healing in all its forms and manifestations is essentially a struggle against the evil forces that deny the freedom and dignity of God's gift of life. The evil forces are not only socio-economic; they are also moral, spiritual, rational and ecological. Healing aims to combat these forces and to rediscover what it means to be human. This biblical concept must remain dominant if the Christian understanding of healing is to become the motivating force of any healing process.
- b. ***Healing and salvation are interconnected.*** Healing means saving life from the evil powers that threaten, disintegrate and corrupt it. It is a process leading towards full and ultimate healing in Christ. Hence, healing is essentially salvation. In the New Testament salvation (*soteria*) and healing (*therapeuo*) are used interchangeably (Lk. 10: 9, Mk. 5: 34, 6:56, Mt. 10: 7-8). Healing is the proclamation of salvation in Christ; it grants new life by empowering the helpless and hopeless with the Holy Spirit's life-giving power. Healing must be seen within the context of Christ's economy of salvation. Christ's miracles of healing were not self-centred and isolated events; they were oriented towards salvation: "All those who touched him were saved" (Mk. 6: 55-6). The Gospel is a message of new life. In Orthodox theology and spirituality this important aspect of healing is spelled out sharply.
- c. ***Healing generates renewal.*** Renewal is a vital dimension of liberation and salvation. It delivers us from sin and corruption and opens the way to God's future in Christ. Renewal is a new beginning in Christ. It anticipates the eschaton. As a liberation and transformation process, renewal is dynamic, creative and holistic, embracing the totality of life in all its aspects and expressions. The Holy Spirit constantly renews humanity in the image of God (Col. 3: 9-10, 2 Cor. 5: 17). Renewal is not only person-based; it includes all of humanity and the cosmos.

3. COMMUNITY-BUILDING

- a. ***Healing is relationship building.*** Community is an essential dimension of human life. Life without community becomes a source of hate and violence. The biblical meaning of healing is integration into the community with others. In the Bible, healing is directed both to the needy and the powerful (Mk. 5). Being in harmony with each other and building relationships is an important aspect of healing. In fact, relationship building is fundamentally community building. Healing does not deal with an individual as such, but always with his or her relationship with the neighbour, with nature and with God. Through the individual, healing is directed towards the entire community. Healing has a personal character (Ex. 15: 26, Mk. 2: 11, Lk. 8: 48, Jn. 5: 6), a community dimension and implications (Lk. 5: 12-16, 8: 40-48, Mk. 5: 21-34). Healing and community building are intimately interwoven. Healing means community building and community building implies a healing process.
- b. ***Healing is reinstating a right relationship with creation.*** It affirms the goodness of God's creation by being in harmony with the natural environment. The creation is the household of humanity. As God's own work, creation

belongs to Him and is given to humanity to be used only for the Creator's purpose and glory. The misuse or abuse of creation by human beings is a sin against God. The brokenness of God's creation, caused by human transgression, needs to be healed. In the context of restoration of the humanity-God relationship, creation has an important place. It also plays a significant part in community building. According to Orthodox soteriology, the economy of Christ embraces the whole creation. Particular attention needs to be given to this dimension in modern ecotheology.

- c. ***As a Christocentric koinonia the church is called to grow into a healing community.*** Being church means being a therapeutic community. The church is called to share the spiritual and physical concerns and wounds of its members and to reach out to those in need of healing. It must, through sacramental life, evangelistic witness and diaconal action, help people in a given place reintegrate themselves to the total life, spirituality and witness of the church. Community building is a process to enable people to overcome their alienation from God and each other. Healing implies creation of harmony, peace and unity, as opposed to conflict and division (Jn. 5: 6-8, 14). As a new community, built and transformed by Christ, the church has a special vocation: as the herald, it must anticipate a new humanity inaugurated by the Christ-event. God's healing action in the power of the Holy Spirit will reach its consummation with the second coming of Christ in glory.

HEALING AS EMPOWERING

In the New Testament, healing is also perceived as empowering the helpless and marginalized to confront the power of evil. The miracles of Jesus are "works of power" (Acts. 2: 22). Healing is God's power acting through the Holy Spirit in Jesus Christ (Lk. 4: 14). In a world dominated by the forces of globalization, growing militarism, unilateralism and different forms of "ism"s, the question of power has become more than ever a matter of critical importance. What are the challenges and implications of the Christian understanding of power as a source of healing, transforming and empowering?

1. POWER AS A DOMINATING AND LIBERATING FORCE

- a. ***Definition of power.*** Power is ambiguous and ambivalent; it can be both constructive and destructive, good and evil, and can lead both to wholeness and alienation. Power is generally associated with force and dominance, absoluteness and violence. The paradoxical nature of power (*dunamis*) is also evident in the Bible, where it means "to be able", implying the ability both to do good and to do harm. However, this does not in any way imply dualism. Human power will always remain ambiguous and fragile.
- b. ***Use of power.*** God's power incarnated in Christ is liberating, healing and transforming. The question is not, therefore, power as such, but the proper use of it. Power must not be used to overpower, but to empower the other. It must be used to restore human dignity and quality of life. Justice must undergird any use of power. Any form of power that empowers those who are already powerful and impoverishes those who are powerless is simply the abuse of power. The WCC has frequently condemned the exploitation and misuse of power, which God has granted to us in Christ as a source of love and liberation. The arbitrary and unjust exercise of power causes corruption, oppression and dehumanization.

- c. ***Moral criterion in the exercise of power.*** Power must not be based on force; it must be based on values. It must not be used for personal interests, but for the well being of all. Power must be sustained by ethical principles and be used responsibly. We witness today a crisis of criterion in the exercise of power in all areas and on all levels of public life, including religion. Global governance is in decay due to the lack of moral criteria. Power requires moral direction; otherwise it will become an instrument of evil. The role of religion in respect to the right understanding and responsible use of power is extremely important, since for many religions and societies the ultimate origin of any power is in religion.

2. THE CHURCH IS THE BEARER OF GOD'S HEALING POWER

- a. ***The need to transform the ambiguity of power.*** Christ empowered the disciples with the "power and authority to drive out all demons" and "to cure diseases" (Lk. 9: 1, Mt. 10:1, Mk. 3: 15, Acts 1: 8). As bearer of God's healing power, the church is called to become God's instrument of transformation and empowerment. The church's power is one of service and not domination, one of love and not oppression, one of sharing and not absoluteness. Different forms of the abuse of power within church-related institutions often raise strong criticism in our churches. The church is called to heal the arrogance and dilemma inherent in power. It is called to challenge and not to imitate the power of the world; to become the herald of the powerless, and to announce that judgement must begin at God's household. The Melbourne Conference of CWME stated: "Our response to dehumanization and oppression cannot be, as it were from an innocent church to a guilty world, for we know to our shame that power exercised with the church (in the empirical reality of its earthly form) can be abused".^{[ii](#)}
- b. ***From violent to non-violent power.*** The power of violence is becoming omnipresent in all societies. Power has almost become synonymous with the culture of death. The biblical concept of power is life giving and life sustaining. It is a power that enhances coherence and peace, justice and creativity. It is a power that promotes non-violent resistance in defence of freedom and human dignity. Non-violent power is not the absence of power; rather, it is the rejection of violence as an expression of power and as a means to restore justice and peace. How can the church develop and promote an understanding of power that maintains non-violent power as criterion and model? In fact, the Decade to Overcome Violence, launched by the Council five years ago, provides the opportunity and the context for the churches and the ecumenical movement to pursue this formidable and urgent task.
- c. ***From sufficiency to vulnerability of power.*** All forms and expressions of human power are imperfect and limited. God alone is the ultimate source of all power. Any expression or structure of human power that pretends to be sufficient is a source of moral and spiritual evil. This sense of self-sufficiency generates misuse and abuse of power, which, in turn, causes hatred, alienation and violence. The limits and limitations of human power must be clearly defined, and its vulnerability must be admitted, not only in theory, but also in praxis, particularly by those who uphold the claim of sufficiency.
- d. ***From absolute to accountable power.*** Human power is subject to God. The human being has received it as a gift from God; hence, it must be used only within the limits of God's purpose for the whole of humanity and creation. Those who perceive power as absolute and exercise it as such rebel against

God. Any form of power that lacks transparency and accountability (such as politically oppressing, economically exploiting or socially marginalizing people) is corrupt, oppressive and dehumanizing. Human power is always under God's judgement; and it must be exercised with a profound sense of accountability to people and to God.

- e. ***From centralized to shared power.*** Any structure of power that functions in a centralized and exclusive way is doomed to failure sooner or later. Any understanding or exercise of power that is not based on peoples' rights, peoples' participation and decision, is abuse of power. While unilateral use of power creates an exploiter and an exploited and becomes an evil force, shared power promotes justice and progress, enhances participation and builds community, thus becoming a source of creativity. Sharing is empowering and empowering creates mutuality and trust. Power must be owned and delegated by people and must be at the service of people.

3. FOR A POWER THAT TRANSFORMS

- a. ***Power as a force for transformation.*** Faith in Christ is a source of power; it generates the power of healing and transformation: "Your faith has healed you" (Mk. 5: 34). Gospel power is transformative: through it the blind see, the lame walk, the leper is cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised (Lk. 7:22). As transformative power, healing restores and renews and brings about a new beginning. The economy of Christ, seen in this particular perspective, is the coming of the Kingdom of God and its confrontation with the forces of the counter-kingdom (Lk. 9:1), aimed at transforming what was fallen and distorted. As "works of power" (Acts 2: 22) Christ's miracles of healing are signs that the power of God's kingdom has subdued the power of Satan (Lk. 10: 18) and the transformation of the world has become a reality here and now.
- b. ***Transformative power has cosmic scope.*** Transformative power is not confined to individuals and to a particular community. It is God's instrument for the realization of His purpose for the whole of humanity and creation (Rev. 21: 3-4). Transformative power aims for a humanity created in the image of God; it strives for the fullness, integrity and quality of life that was incarnated by Christ; it endeavours to create a just, responsible and participatory society governed by the values of the Gospel; it struggles for a creation which is used for God's purpose and not exploited for human self-interests. In other words, the Christian understanding of power upholds a vision of society and creation revealed in Christ. The early church fathers strongly stressed the holistic nature and cosmic dimension of God's transformative power in Christ. This important feature of patristic theology, still vividly preserved in Orthodox theological thinking, must be taken seriously in the context of the growing impact of ecology and globalization on contemporary theology.
- c. ***The church is an agent of God's transformative power.*** Christ was empowered by the Holy Spirit "to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed" (Lk. 4: 18-19). As the agent of God's kingdom, the church's vocation is to continue this mission by combating the "powers and principalities" (Eph. 1: 21, Col. 2: 10) of this world. It must resist the dehumanizing trends of power in all spheres of society and become, through active evangelism, diakonia and prophetic witness, a dynamic instrument of God's transformative power. The church, as a transformed community and a new creation, must reveal in its own life and mission God's transformative

power as a source of healing and empowering. In a world dominated by evil forces, Gospel values must play a corrective role in the church's right perception and exercise of power. Gospel values empower the poor, the oppressed, the alienated. They empower the people to organize and govern themselves in dignity, in peace with justice.

4. GOD'S POWER IS REVEALED THROUGH POWERLESSNESS

- a. ***God's power is the power of love.*** In biblical understanding power is God's free gift of grace and love. Paul reminds us that: "God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but rather a spirit of power and love" (II Tim. 1:7). Power and love are intimately intertwined. God's power in Jesus Christ was one of self-giving and self-emptying. Christ challenged human power with the cross; He overcame evil with the power of love. Love is at the heart of the Gospel power. Therefore, the Gospel power is powerlessness; it is God's kenosis. Christ healed and empowered us by carrying our sicknesses: "Through his wounds we are healed" (1 Ptr. 2: 24). The cross, the supreme expression of powerlessness, became the concrete manifestation of God's power (1 Cor. 1: 17-18; Rm. 1: 16, Phil. 3: 10-11). Christ's kenosis is not an expression of weakness, but of self-giving power; it is the power of love: "The power of God is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12: 9). There is power in powerlessness: "God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (I Cor. 1:25). Paul says: "I am content with weakness□, for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12: 10, 13: 4). What a paradox! When God's love is at work then healing, empowering and transformation happens.
- b. ***God's powerlessness is life-generating.*** God's suffering in Christ became a life-generating event, a source of healing. The message of the Gospel is that God through Christ took the sting of death and robbed it of its power (1 Cor. 15:55-56). Therefore, the power of the cross is life giving and not life-destroying; through it the power of death has been subdued. God's powerlessness is His healing, empowering and transforming power. In other words, through the cross, God shared our brokenness and through the resurrection He restored us in our authentic humanness by recreating, renewing and transforming our life. In my church, in the eucharistic celebration we sing: "with His death Christ trampled death, and with His resurrection He gave us life". The cross is the expression of God's kenosis; the resurrection is the manifestation of God's life-giving power. This happens in each and in all places when the eucharist is celebrated. Indeed, a life sustained by kenosis is the way of life revealed by Christ.
- c. ***God's powerlessness is the church's source of empowering.*** God's power proclaimed by Jesus Christ is the rejection of the powers of this world and the manifestation of His grace and love in powerlessness. God's healing action in Christ empowers the powerless; it liberates, humanizes and transforms. Christ the Powerful made Himself powerless in order to empower the powerless. Empowered by Christ, the church must carry out the mission of combating those forces of this world that exercise a demonic influence on society. The church is not on the side of power, but of powerlessness, not with the powerful but with the powerless. The church must challenge all acts that pursue overpowering, and support and engage in all acts that promote empowering.ⁱⁱⁱ This implies conscientization and awareness building and rejecting corrupt socio-economic systems and oppressive governance. The church remains

powerful in powerlessness so long as it remains obedient to God's covenant with humanity through Christ. The church's prophetic struggle against violence and injustice is the church's empowerment by Christ. This empowerment is a source of healing, transformation and reconciliation.

HEALING AS RECONCILING

Reconciliation is the fruit of healing. The Bible is full of stories of reconciliation. The Christ-event is a source and a message of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5: 18–20). What are the distinctive marks of reconciliation in a Christian perspective?

1. RECONCILIATION IS A HEALING PROCESS

- a. ***God in Christ is the converging point of reconciliation.*** Reconciliation (*katallage*) belongs to God; it is God's redeeming act in Christ: "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (Col. 1: 19-20). In Christ God reconciled humanity and the creation to Him, and created a new humanity (2 Cor. 5: 17-21). Reconciliation displays three interrelated dimensions: reconciliation between God and human beings, reconciliation among human beings, and reconciliation of the whole creation. As a healing and transformation process, reconciliation is multi-dimensional and all embracing. It essentially means turning to God and restoring God's image in human beings. God assumed humanity in order to heal by reconciling human beings to Him. Reconciliation is not, therefore, human-made; it is rooted in God and is integral to Christ's salvific economy. God in Christ is the driving force and the rallying point of reconciliation.
- b. ***Reconciliation is a cross-centred process.*** It comes not through human power but through God's powerlessness in Christ. God identified Himself with the suffering of humanity to heal it. Christ reconciled us to God by His blood (Rm. 5: 1). Reconciliation is not an easy process; it implies risk and sacrifice. In order to experience the power of the victory of life over death, one has to go through a process of kenosis (Phil. 2: 6-7). Healing involves suffering; reconciliation presupposes sacrifice. Suffering becomes redemptive when it is undergirded by spiritual and moral values and by a life-centred vision. Suffering is changed into a transformative process when it aims at a new beginning. God's grace and love are revealed through kenosis. New hope dawns and new life emerges when we share the cross of Christ. Without the cross, reconciliation becomes a political consensus of provisional nature and limited scope.
- c. ***Reconciliation is a trust-building process.*** Real reconciliation is more than a political agreement; it is a change of consciousness, transformation of attitudes, healing of memories. Reconciliation breaks down the wall of hostility (Eph. 2: 14) and creates a new environment for rapprochement and a space for dynamic and creative interaction. Listening to each other's stories generates mutual understanding and enhances mutual trust. Indeed, confidence building is crucial to the healing process. True reconciliation strives primarily at building bridges across religious, social and cultural divides. Many societies are suffering tensions and conflicts between communities that have been fuelled by religious and ethnic considerations. Trust building transforms confrontation into reconciliation, and thereby enables religions, cultures and

civilizations to live together harmoniously and responsibly as one community. Trust-building is, indeed, a great challenge for today.

- d. **Reconciliation is a community-oriented process.** Reconciliation responds to brokenness, fragmentation, enmity, estrangement and distorted relationships. Hence, community-building is central to the healing and reconciliation process. God in Christ reconciled us to Himself and to each other by building us as a Koinonia. Reconciliation, which goes beyond the confines of individuals to embrace the whole community, is a people-oriented process; people, not ideas, need to be reconciled. Therefore, reconciliation must not be perceived merely as a *modus vivendi* of positions. As a healing process, reconciliation must be rooted in the common life and consciousness of people, impacting all spheres and dimensions of the community. Reconciliation does not relieve tensions; rather, it transforms a community by introducing a new value system and promoting the creative interaction of diversities and even of tensions. Reconciled diversities and coherent relations will ensure greater integrity for the community.
- e. **Ministry of reconciliation: a God-given mandate to the church.** In God's continuous act of reconciliation in the power of the Spirit and through Christ, the church is an 'ambassador'; it is given a ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5: 18-20), which is at the core of the church's *missio dei*: "Through our Lord Jesus Christ we have now received our reconciliation" (Rm. 5:14). Not only is the church mandated by Christ to fulfil this ministry; it is called to become the ferment and a model of reconciled community. Reconciliation pertains to the very being and becoming of the church. Reconciliation is not going back by re-establishing the *status quo ante*. Reconciliation is moving forward towards a new future. In transforming the brokenness of the world and reconciling it to Himself, God opened a new future and initiated a new community. In Christ the new future and the new creation became a reality. In a world torn apart by division and conflict how direly we need to build reconciled communities, where differences are respected, conflicts are overcome and mutual trust is built. In order to engage itself responsibly in such ministry, the church itself must become a reconciled community.

2. CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS: THE WAY TOWARDS RECONCILIATION

- a. **Forgiveness: a gift and a task.** Forgiveness for healing of memories occupies an important place on the agenda of modern societies. It has become a part of public discourse and rhetoric. Ethnic groups, nations, states and even religions are wrestling with this issue in one way or another. Unfortunately, forgiveness has lost much of its meaning; generally it is expected easily and offered cheaply. In the Bible, forgiveness (*aphesis*) has a special importance and it means release, liberation from sin, guilt or debt. Only God can forgive human sin (Lk. 5: 21, 7: 49), since God is the source of love. Being God's gift, forgiveness is also a task to be accomplished by His church (Mt. 5: 23-24; John 20: 21-3; 2 Cor. 5: 19). Thus, the church is endowed by divine power to forgive sins and lead the human person and community towards healing and reconciliation. In the Nicean creed we confess: "I believe in the forgiveness of sins". Forgiveness is an essential aspect of Christian faith and a vital dimension of Christian vocation. Healing and reconciliation imply forgiveness.
- b. **Forgiving is not ignoring the past.** It is healing the past: "Forgiving is not forgetting; it is rather remembering in a different way".^{iv} The past must be confronted boldly and be challenged responsibly. Forgiving also means

looking forward with new faith, hope and vision. Besides committing to life together in peace with justice, forgiveness challenges and empowers both the forgiver and the forgiven to engage together in the common task to create a hopeful future by liberating themselves from the bitterness of the past. Neglecting the past with its wounds will not help to build a reconciled community. Forgetting the hurt memories will not lead people to look forward and to commit themselves to a new future. Forgiving is the beginning of healing. By affirming our past, we heal and reconcile our memories and transform our wounds.

- c. ***The acceptance of truth is the sine qua non condition for forgiveness.*** Guilt must be admitted; truth must be told. The acknowledgement of truth in its totality is the first concrete and hopeful step towards a new beginning. Healing is generated primarily through truth telling. Allow me in this regard to remind you of the painful story of my own people. This year my church and people will commemorate the 90th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide. During the First World War in 1915, one-and-a-half million Armenians were massacred by the Ottoman-Turkish government according to a well-devised and systematically executed plan. Although my generation did not directly experience the tragic past, the Armenian Genocide has had a strong impact on our spiritual and intellectual formation. The past haunts the victims; we cannot free ourselves from the past unless that past is duly recognized. A Preparatory Document for the forthcoming CWME conference emphatically states: "Healing requires that the silence be broken and the truth be allowed to come to light. It allows for **recognition** of what has been hidden".^v
- d. ***Forgiveness must lead to reconciling memories.*** Memory is a living source of history and an essential aspect of self-understanding. In the reconciliation process spaces must be created where hurt memories are healed, transformed and reconciled. Health professionals have identified forgiveness as a powerful psychotherapeutic cure.^{vi} In fact, when the memories are not healed, they hold us hostage to the past; when they are healed, through confession and forgiveness, they empower us to rebuild relationships, promote mutual trust and acceptance, and engage in a process of transformation. Unhealed memories cause violence, hate and fragmentation. Forgiveness, as a response to confession, is a determining factor in the healing and reconciliation process. Through forgiveness, we accept each other in truth and justice. Forgiveness is costly; only confession must lead to forgiveness, which is a pre-condition for real healing and reconciliation.
- e. ***Forgiveness must generate justice.*** Justice is at the heart of the reconciliation process. By justice I do not mean vindictive justice; rather, I mean restorative and transformative justice, which are the basis of true healing and reconciliation. This process must involve both the victim and the perpetrator, each of whom has his or her share in a justice-oriented reconciliation process. Impunity perpetuates injustice; yet, punishing the offender is not an end. The purpose of confession and forgiveness is reconciliation. Truth and justice must be put at the service of healing and reconciliation. The "Truth and Reconciliation" process in South Africa warned against "cheap reconciliation", meaning reconciliation without justice. Only restorative justice will generate real reconciliation. The healing process includes empowering the powerless, accompanying them and struggling for justice and reconciliation.

Reconciliation as God's healing act frees us from brokenness and fear, and makes us a new and transformed community (Rm. 5: 6-11; 2 Cor. 5: 17).

TOWARDS A MISSION OF HEALING IN A BROKEN WORLD

1. A RENEWED MISSION OF HEALING

The Vancouver Assembly (1983) declared: "The Church exists in the midst of the world where brokenness and lack of harmony find their expression not only in sickness and conflicts, but also in the marginalization and oppression that many people endure due to economic, racial, political and cultural reasons. This situation is a challenge to the church to carry out its healing ministry in a holistic way, and in a praxis renewed by the power of Christ's love – which is the basis of the ministry."^{vii} The call of Vancouver for a healing ministry is more urgent today than ever before. The church must exercise its healing ministry mainly as one of transforming, empowering and reconciling.

- a. Today, the brokenness of the world is being experienced existentially and acutely. Humanity is caught in a state of deep fear and insecurity. The world is increasingly becoming confusing and threatening. Lack of mutual trust and tolerance between communities is polarizing them and making them more violent. Is there any more credible and urgent mission for the church than to become a true instrument of God's healing, transforming, empowering and reconciling power? Against human power Christ revealed His powerlessness; against human pride He revealed His humility; against human hatred He revealed His love; against human divisions He revealed His reconciliation; against human sin He revealed His salvation; against human death He revealed His life. This is the way of Christ. This must become the way of His church. God's mission calls for a healing church in the midst of a broken, fragmented and alienated world.
- b. We must rediscover the ecclesiology of the early church, which considered healing integral to its very nature. We must also rediscover the holistic vision of mission that maintains healing as central to the church's vocation. The increasing concern towards healing, manifested in different ways and to different degrees by our churches, is an encouraging sign, indeed. Yet, it must be given a more organized form, efficient expression and clear direction. In our missiological reflection and missionary engagement the centrality of the church's healing ministry must be strongly emphasized. The specificity of the Christian concept of healing must be clearly spelled out: we must, first, integrate faith-healing and medical healing; second, take community and ecological dimensions of healing seriously; and, third, understand healing as a salvation-oriented holistic process.
- c. Besides the ecclesiological and missiological perceptions, socio-cultural practices (mainly in African and South and North American cultures) too play an important role in reshaping and enhancing the churches' healing ministry. The way these cultures exercise healing power raises some critical questions. First, the ministry of healing belongs to the church as a whole. God also uses human beings as instruments for His healing power, but it must be done within the healing ministry of the church and not in isolation and in a self-centred way. Second, the exercise of a healing ministry by individuals must not involve any form of financial transaction. This distorts the church's healing

power. Third, although the use of indigenous cultural forms and approaches in a healing ministry is a sign of strength and richness, it may easily lead to syncretism when cultural forms are considered as norms and are not checked by the Gospel.

- d. A balance between community-oriented and individual-oriented approaches to the church's healing, empowering and reconciling mission is necessary. Special attention must be given to family, which in many societies today is broken and distorted morally and spiritually. Healing and re-building the community must start from the family. Christian education and formation must accompany the healing process. A renewed healing ministry is also called to give a greater efficiency to the church's prophetic witness in its manifold aspects and manifestations.

2. HEALING: AN ECUMENICAL PRIORITY

What are the implications of a renewed mission of healing to the ecumenical movement? In my report to the Harare Assembly (1998), I said: "The churches are challenged to bring the full range of their resources to bear on human brokenness, as a sign of God's desired fullness of life for all. While it will not be possible to continue to conduct programmes in this area in the same style as in the past, the healing ministry of the church, as an essential dimension of the churches' missionary calling, [will] continue to be one of the foci of the Council's work."^{viii} I still believe so. I would like also to remind you that in our first meeting after the Harare Assembly, along with "being church" and "common witness and service amidst globalization", we identified "caring for life" and "ministry of reconciliation" as foci for the Council's ecumenical witness.^{ix} In fact, the work done so far in these areas, in my judgement, is not satisfactory in view of the growing needs, challenges and expectations. Theological discussion on healing and alternative medicine, healing and culture, and healing and inter-faith dialogue, as well as on a number of unresolved and controversial issues, must continue in the post-Assembly period. I want to identify a few specific areas where, in my opinion, more focused work needs to be done:

- a. Healing primarily deals with *life* in all its forms and manifestations. Hence, caring for life should become the driving force and the sustaining power of healing. The Council's concern for caring for life must, with renewed emphasis, continue to address issues related to theology of life, life-centred ethics and spirituality, the culture of peace and non-violence, etc.
- b. Healing is also related to *anthropology*: what is a human being, and what is his or her place and vocation in creation? We need to review our anthropological perceptions and convictions in view of the enormous advances and changes taking place in all spheres of human life. In this context ethical questions arising from biotechnology, birth control, abortion, and human sexuality need to be studied realistically with the active participation of the churches. The recent study of Faith and Order on theological anthropology is an important initiative. Faith and Order must continue this process by broadening its scope and deepening its reflection.
- c. We must not ignore the *ecological* dimension. As I pointed out, healing must be holistic and all embracing. The whole creation is within the purview of God's healing action in Christ. The ecological system is in need of healing. This is not an environmental issue; it is a theological, moral and spiritual issue. The basic concerns related to the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation

(JPIC) process must acquire a renewed attention within a different programmatic or thematic framework.

- d. Mission as **reconciliation** seems to be an emerging missiological paradigm. I hope that the conference of CWME will pick up this matter. The interconnectedness of mission and reconciliation needs to be sharpened, particularly from an ecclesiological perspective. Although we must not limit the scope of mission only to reconciliation (the *missio dei* goes beyond reconciliation), because of increasing conflicts in many societies, we must give priority on the Council's agenda to reconciliation as a mission-issue.
- e. The question of **power** has been addressed by the ecumenical movement at different times and in relation to different issues. Due to new global developments, the question of power must occupy an important place in ecumenical discussion. We must develop a concept of power that is based on sharing, sustainability and moral principles, a concept of power that challenges unilateralism and legitimacy of any form of human power, strengthens structures of accountability and affirms mutual vulnerability.
- f. And, finally, I am deeply convinced that "**being church**" must remain a major and priority concern for the whole ecumenical movement. Healing ministry is a crucial dimension of being church today. By taking the healing power of the Holy Spirit to the world, the church becomes fully and authentically itself in its inner being and missionary outreach. How can the churches play a credible role in becoming a healing instrument of God when they still remain under the impact of their history of division? As partner with God in His healing, transforming, empowering and reconciling mission in the world, as we said in our Ecumenical Vision,

"We journey together as people freed by God's forgiveness.

In the midst of the brokenness of the world,

We proclaim the good news of reconciliation, healing and justice in Christ".^x

ARAM I CATHOLICOS OF CILICIA

February 2005

Antelias, Lebanon

Notes

^{*} This text was first presented to the February 2005 meeting of the WCC Central Committee as the report of the moderator. We are most grateful to HH Aram I for allowing its circulation as a preparatory paper for the CWME Conference prior to its publication in the *Ecumenical Review*.

ⁱ ***Healing and wholeness: the Church's Role in Health***. The Report of a study by the Christian Medical Commission, Geneva, WCC, 1990, p. 6.

ⁱⁱ Report of section IV, § 12, in: ***Your Kingdom Come, Mission Perspectives***, Report on the World Conference on Mission and Evangelism, Melbourne, Australia, 12-25 May 1980; Geneva, WCC, 1980, p. 213.

[iii](#) The ecumenical reflection on power and powerlessness had two entry points. The CWME conference in Melbourne (cf. Section IV) defended a critical approach to power, emphasizing non-violence and powerlessness, a position reflected also in the "Ecumenical Affirmation on Mission and Evangelism" (1982). The San Antonio conference of CWME insisted more on the creative power of resistance and empowerment of the poor (cf. section II). In my view, these two approaches are legitimate and they strengthen and complement each other.

[iv](#) Robert J. Schreiter, "The Theology of Reconciliation and Peacemaking for Mission", in *Mission, Violence and Reconciliation*, eds. H. Mellor and T. Yates, Sheffield, Cliff College Publishing, 2004, p. 22.

[v](#) "Mission as ministry of reconciliation", *CWME Conference Preparatory Paper No 10*, Geneva, WCC, 2005, § 38.

[vi](#) Rodney L. Petersen, "Forgiveness and Reconciliation in Christian Theology", in *The Orthodox Church in a pluralistic World*, ed. Emmanuel Clapsis, Geneva, WCC, 2004, p. 113.

[vii](#) *Gathered for Life, Official Report VI Assembly, Vancouver, Canada, 24 July – 10 August 1983*, ed. David Gill, Geneva, WCC, 1983, p. 64, # 10.

[viii](#) "Report of the Moderator", in *Together on the Way: Official Report of the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, ed. Diana Kessler, Geneva, 1999, p. 52.

[ix](#) *World Council of Churches, Central Committee, Minutes of the Fiftieth Meeting, Geneva, Switzerland, 26, August-3 September, 1999*, Geneva, 1999, p. 90.

[x](#) *Together on the Way*, op.cit., p. 114.