

Health Care You Can Live With

Dr. Scott Morris, a family physician and ordained minister, founded the Church Health Care Center in Memphis in 1987 to provide medical care for the uninsured. It has grown into the largest faith-based clinic of its type in the U.S. Morris' training, medically and theologically, offers him a unique perspective on health care and wellness. In his new book, he discusses these topics and also offers insights on how the church should respond.

Tell us about the Church Health Center you started in Memphis.

Dr. Scott Morris: We began in 1987. We provide health care for people who work in low-wage jobs who don't have health insurance. We take care of the people who work to make our lives comfortable. They shine your shoes, cook your food and one day dig your grave, and they don't complain, yet when they get sick their options are very few. We currently care for over 70,000 people. We're not a federally funded anything. We are totally supported by people of faith. The reason why we do what we do is that the call to discipleship is to do three things: to preach, to teach and to heal. In our churches, we got the preach and the teach down, but what does it mean to have a healing ministry? That's what the Church Health Center is all about and we do

it in three ways: medically, which is a traditional clinic which cares for people from the cradle to the grave; wellness, [which is] all about keeping people healthy, and finally outreach, which is engaging churches to help churches understand in today's world what a healing ministry looks like.

Your book has a striking title in light of our political climate. Why did you name it as you did?

Morris: I'm not smart enough to know how to solve all the great social problems in America. I can't do that, but what the book is focused on is, what should the church be doing? How should we as people of faith be engaged of the lives of our neighbors, doing what we believe God expects of us? Taking care of the greatest gift we have ever been given, our bodies. We are an incarnational church. We believe that God created us, created us good, created our bodies to be good and has given us an obligation to care for them, and yet all too often, we in the church don't do a very good job of doing that. So *Health Care You Can Live With* is really about two things: how you as an individual can take responsibility for your own life and your own body and spirit, and then how to help a church be engaged in what, through community, a healthy life looks like.

What led to your practicing holistically?

Morris: I grew up in Atlanta, and I was always

interested in the church, but yet the thought of preaching 52 sermons a year sent shivers down my spine and it still does—I'm always impressed that people can do that. But I read the Bible. It's on every page, issues around health and healing. A third of the New Testament has to do with healing the sick, and yet if you look around and see what churches do, we pray for people on Sunday mornings, the pastors expect to visit people in the hospital, a few people visit the shut-ins, and that's the final healing ministry. What I came to learn over time is that that is not the way the church has always approached it. In truth, the church has always been involved in direct hands-on health care, yet we've come to let Plato and Descartes philosophically and theologically rule the day. What I mean by that is we have come to believe in a dualistic way of seeing a human person. We've separated people into a body and a spirit. At no point does Jesus walk away from a healing ministry. In fact, that's what He does every day. If you want to be a faithful follower of Jesus, then you've got to figure out how to do that, too.

What do you encourage in terms of emotional health?

Morris: People come to the doctor today for reasons they used to come to the pastor. It's all very complicated why that is, but doctors are not trained in dealing with what are fundamentally spiritual

problems. Spiritual problems require spiritual solutions, and it's for that reason this book advocates and we at the Church Health Center advocate that the church has to become more involved in caring for the body in order for us to be effective for caring for the spirit.

So do you recommend being a physician and an ordained minister?

Morris: It's been a great life for me and I wish there were more people like that, and historically that was the case. Prior to the Civil War, if you were sick, the most likely person anyone would have seen for health care was a pastor. A pastor provided all the health care there was in this country. Over the last 150 years, things have obviously changed, so no, you don't have to be a physician and a pastor, but if you want to be a faithful follower of Jesus, the call to discipleship is to teach, preach and heal. You don't get to take a pass on the healing part, that's for you personally and for your congregation. Finding what a healing ministry is for you today, and in the future it's the only way you can truly follow the gospel.

You say we have an unholy love affair with technology—how can we get back into balance?

Morris: This unholy love affair with technology is exactly the problem with the whole health care reform issue. I'm not taking a political stance one way or the other about this. We have in America created

a way of providing health care that is predicated on the belief that I can live my life any way I want to because ultimately the doctor will be able to fix me. That's just not right. It is also the thing that has driven the cost of health care beyond our ability to pay for it. We need to focus on those things that actually bring about health. Health is not about the absence of disease. Health is about things like playing with your grandkids, going fishing one more time, living in the community, being a part of the church—that's what being healthy is all about.

You have a chapter titled "Don't believe everything you hear at church." What are the things we hear in church that aren't quite right?

Morris: An example of what's not quite right is that the least healthy meal you could eat every week is at your church. It shouldn't be that way. We have come to endorse the sin of gluttony for the sake of fellowship. That's not OK. Again, we have this obligation to care for this body. God expects us to do it and the church ought lead the way, not bring up the rear. We have potlucks in our church, but we are constantly working at trying to make them healthier. We literally spent \$20,000 to come up with a recipe for turnip greens that taste like your grandmother cooked them.

You talk of rewriting the health care contract. What do you mean by that?

Morris: We assume that the doctor is the person in charge of my life and my health. Well, that's not right. Giving the doctor authority to write prescriptions for you and give you pills, that's not going to help anything. Pills are poison—that's how they work. They poison your body to prevent it from doing something it naturally trying to do. The new contract needs to be how I am in charge of the life God has given me, and I have an obligation to take care of it, and I turn to the people who help me live that life in a healthy way, hopefully people in your congregation.

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