

Churches That Heal

People who suffer from anxiety, depression or other significant mental health conditions often isolate themselves. They may not want to admit how they're feeling or fear the stigma of being labeled "mentally ill," and the church often doesn't know how to effectively help them. Enter Churches That Heal, a digital program for churches designed by Dr. Henry Cloud, clinical psychologist, a pastor of pastors and a New York Times bestselling author who is perhaps best known for *Boundaries*, written with Dr. John Townsend.

Churches That Heal came out of Dr. Cloud's foundational belief that God often wants to use the church directly as His healing agent.

"When we think of God's healing, we obviously think of His direct healing because God does directly heal people," he says. "We know that. I've seen it. I've experienced it. But what we don't realize a lot of times is that His body—the church—is not only a place where He would heal people, but His body itself is a healing agent."

He says this role is found throughout the New Testament.

"One of the clearest places you see this is in Ephesians 4, where it says the whole body, knitted and joined together by every supporting ligament grows as it heals itself in love as each part does its work," he says. "It says it actually does this to itself as each member is doing its work. And what you see throughout the Scriptures is that God has put this body of people together through which He does His healing process."

"If you go to I Peter 4, for example, it says that when we're using our gifts with each other, we're administering the grace of God in its various forms. And as a psychologist, I can tell you when people need healing in various areas, like emotional issues, depression, anxiety, PTSD, all those kinds of things,

a huge, huge part of the healing is the processing of that pain and the grief that's involved and the brokenheartedness that's involved, and all of that requires people to do all these 'one anothers' that are spoken of throughout the New Testament. There's supporting one another, there's grieving with one another. There's healing one another through the various functions. There's confronting one another, correcting one another, building one another up, helping the weak."

Operating this way, the body of Christ "heals a lot of these issues that we call mental health issues," he says.

Dr. Cloud developed and tested the program through the years in hospital settings, including the psychiatric hospital units and treatment centers he and Dr. Townsend owned and operated for a dozen years; through the ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ (now Cru) around the world; and in various church settings.

Views on Mental Health

Through the years, Dr. Cloud has observed four prevailing models in the church for caring for people who struggle with mental or emotional problems.

"The first one was the sin model, and that says if you're hurting, then there's sin in your life somewhere—that was a popular one," he says. "The second one is a truth model. If you're hurting, then you obviously don't know the Word. And then you get more of the Bible in your head and memorize the Bible and so on, and that'll heal all your hurts.

"The third one was kind of internal. I call it the 'spiritual retreat burp' model. You go on a retreat for a couple of days, and you kind of burp out all the pain and invite God into the pain. Certainly God does that as well, but it's like that's the way everything was healed. And then the fourth one was the supernatural model where if you're depressed or something, then you need deliverance."

While he doesn't completely discount any of these models, he says, there is more to the story.

"There's truth in all four of those, but none of those are the whole picture at all about how we're actually healed from addictions and emotional issues and depression and anxiety and all these things we suffer from," he cautions. "Early on, in seeing those in practice and watching some things happen but not the kind of transformation that the New Testament promises, I continued to search and to study, and I kind of started over and got a lot of the Christian models out of my head, then went back and read the Scriptures with some years of experience at that point."

After reading the Scriptures afresh, Dr. Cloud had quite the revelation.

"The only way I know to describe it is I was 'born again-again,' because throughout the entire Bible, all of the processes that actually do heal people of all of what we call mental health maladies were right there in the Scriptures, and I was just blown away that we don't hear that. What we hear are the four models, but oftentimes we don't hear the actual processes that God has put into His Word for us to be walking in."

He does qualify his statement and explain that he's not talking about chemical imbalances and the like, but "about the dynamics and the woundedness and the characterological changes and personality shifts and all of those that need to be made in order for anxiety and eating disorders and addictions and all of that to be resolved."

The church often tells Christians to get in the Word, but, Dr. Cloud says, there's more to it than Scripture study. Active application and obedience are critical to the health of the church.

"The Bible says to be not only hearers of the Word, but doers

of the Word,” Dr. Cloud says. “So, for example, you go memorize the Scriptures and you memorize the verse that says, ‘Weep with those who weep.’ Well, you actually have to put your Bible down and go sit down with somebody who’s hurting, or if you’re hurting, process your pain. And so it’s in the Scriptures. They show us all of these healing processes, but we actually have to go do them.

“If you think about a body, the way that in Ephesians 4, it says the body heals itself as each part does its work. If you think you have an infected finger, then you don’t amputate the finger and put it in a drawer with a book on anatomy. That’s not how it works. The book on anatomy describes that that finger has got to be connected to the body, and it’s the whole body that does its work. ... That’s how our bodies heal ourselves, and God’s designed the body of Christ in the same way.”

Who the Program Helps

From this Scripture-based foundation, Churches That Heal empowers the local church to truly help those suffering in their emotional life—and it may even be the pastor in need. Dr. Cloud designed the program to not only help church members get well, but also their leaders. He chose to include pastors in particular after receiving inquiries from pastors who lead churches and ministerial associations. The inquiries were really pleas for help.

“They were saying we have so many pastors who are dropping out of the ministry, they’re some sort of train wreck or they’re just burned out,” Dr. Cloud says. “And they have their own woundedness, and there’s this big dropout rate because it’s just too difficult, and they have their own struggles and pains. Can you do something to help the pastors?”

So along with addressing the mental health crisis in America, the program aims to help pastors.

“There’s a section in there for the pastor and the staff to come alongside them and help them heal in these areas of stress and addiction and depression, anxiety, overcoming past wounds, relational struggles, extended family issues because a pastor and the shepherds experience what the rest of us experience, but they experience it in a particular context, because they’ve got everybody else turned into them,” he says. Part of that context is “everybody sucking the life out of them all the time.”

But, he says, everyone needs some kind of emotional help sometime.

“We come from a dysfunctional family. A lot of people say, ‘Well, I didn’t come from that.’ ‘Well, yes, you did. You came from the family of Adam and Eve, and that’s a dysfunctional family.’ I mean, it didn’t take long. In the first generation, you’ve got murder, right? So it is passed on through the human race through the generations. They’ve passed on these patterns.”

The Bible tells us “we’re also born into sin ourselves,” Dr. Cloud says. “So you could have a perfect family, and we would come out dysfunctional because we bring a fallen nature into it.”

God brings people into His family through salvation, then grows them into healthy adults in healthy families. That’s what He intends and why Dr. Cloud believes in helping the church be a healthy family that can address and resolve emotional issues for better mental health.

How the Program Works

To help the church become a place hurting people run to, not away from, Dr. Cloud carefully designed the Churches That Heal program. The Church Program is comprised of over 30 videos encompassing a pastoral healing journey, pastoral mental health training and church kick-off event. Additionally,

church staff members will have access to a 68-page Leader Workbook and live COVID-19 Crisis Leadership Coaching Webinars with Dr. Cloud.

All of the parts of the program can be run in a face-to-face or virtual environment, ideal during a time when many people are under stay-at-home restrictions.

Two series were recorded for the Pastoral Healing section of the program. One is a Staff Retreat Video Series with five sessions to help staff members discuss emotional challenges and the core elements of healing. Dr. Cloud conducted this staff retreat with pastors and their spouses from a large church. They went to Los Angeles to participate so the retreat could be recorded for all the participating churches to see.

Another is the Staff Small Group Video Series where each video lesson encourages intentional conversation to help leaders conquer their own mental and emotional challenges.

The Church Program also features a Mental Health Video Training Series. The series includes educational videos with practical answers to questions on the church's role in issues of mental health. These videos address questions such as what to do if you're depressed or what to do when someone has panic attacks or what to do if someone is suicidal. The series helps the local church become a place where hurting people feel welcome. It shows them how to set up programs and how to work with local mental health professionals as needed in serious cases.

When the congregation does its Church Kick-Off, leadership can roll out the program as a Half-Day Community Event or a Sunday Morning Message Series, so the Churches That Heal program allows the church some flexibility but also provides needed structure so that nothing is missed and no one is left out of the learning process.

Dr. Cloud did a citywide seminar with Celebration Church in

Jacksonville, Florida, for the Church Kick-Off, touching on depression, anxiety, addictions, eating disorders, codependency and enabling in the family. He also addressed performance, "how we reach our dreams and goals and how we're broken and why it doesn't work and how to make it work," he says.

In addition to the Church Program, there is an Individual Program for people who wish to experience the content by themselves or in the context of a small group.

Individuals who are not part of a Churches That Heal Church Program can participate on their own or give the program as a gift.

"Pastors and churches are getting it," Dr. Cloud says. "But individuals are also getting it to gift to their pastor as a way of saying, 'Thank you for making this a church that heals and for supporting me.'"

Overall, the program takes participants step by step through the four basic tasks of becoming a mature, healthy Christian: bonding to others, separating from others, sorting out good and bad in ourselves and others, and becoming an adult.

While using this program, the church will begin to see more clearly its role as a healing agent.

"Jesus said that the gates of hell will not prevail against my church," Dr. Cloud says. "We've got the gates of hell prevailing in neighborhoods and homes and communities where there's depression and addictions are ruling and when there's broken, really, really hurtful, dysfunctional relationships. But if the body of Christ, as we move into that darkness with salt and light and the healing balm of who He is and His ways, then we can turn the tide on this."

After many years of experience in ministry and clinical settings, Dr. Cloud still believes that, ultimately, "there is

no more powerful answer in the world for these problems than the church.”

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