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Nurturing wellness in Christ

The topic of wellness gets a lot of press these days. We read and see in the media that wellness is more than just the absence of disease. But what about the faith dimensions of wellness that popular media may not talk much about?

In the gospel stories, Jesus does a lot of healing. He often heals people hand-in-hand with proclaiming God's kingdom. In Mark's Gospel, people see Jesus' healings as a new teaching with authority (Mark 1:21-28). Moreover, Jesus works a healing and then immediately tells of his coming death and resurrection (Mark 9:14-32). Then he heals blind Bartimaeus just before his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Mark 10:46-52). Indeed, being healed or being well are intricately linked to God's reign revealed in Jesus Christ.

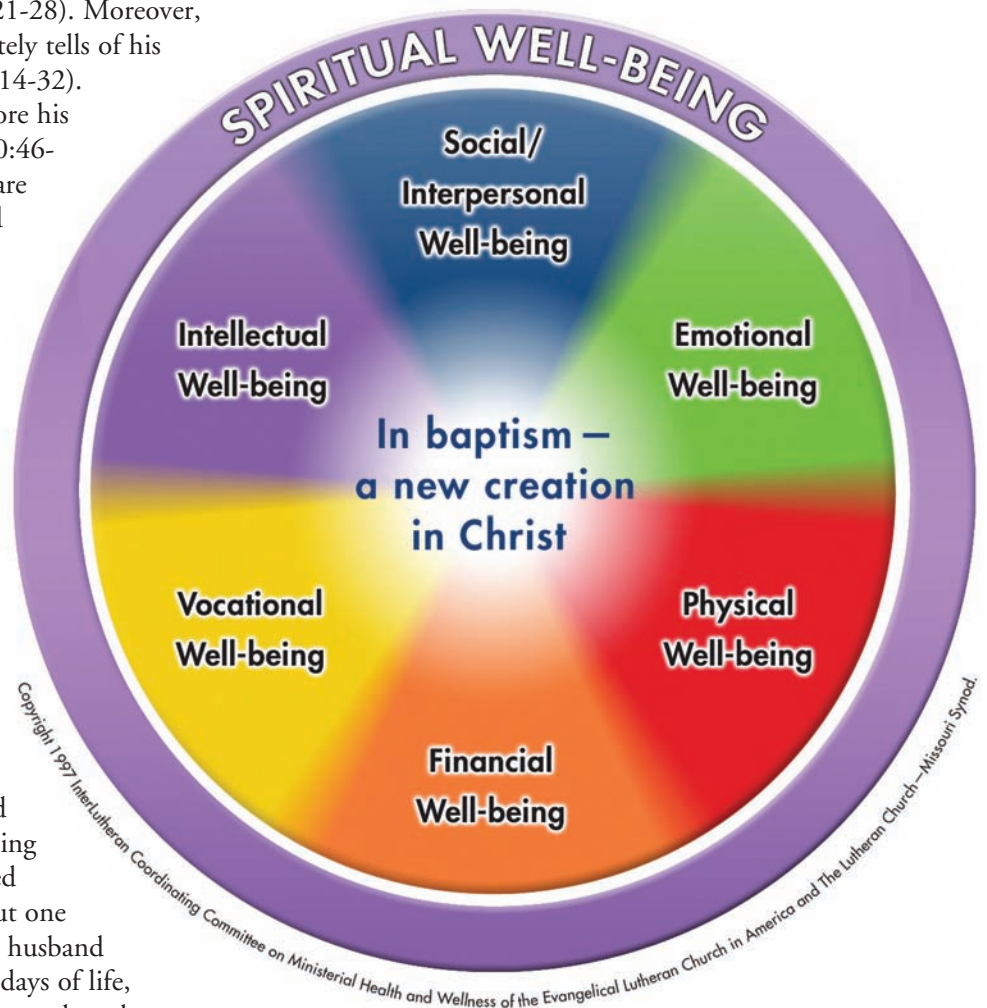
Think also of a word central to the Christian faith: salvation. Did you know that its Latin root has to do with being well and in good health? So salvation is being well in God, and surely as our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, salvation has implications also for our holistic well-being, including our bodies. In the Bible, Jesus often says that faith makes us well; or in certain translations, that faith saves us (cf. Mark 10:52). Wellness and salvation are intimately linked.

What happens when our faith does not make us well in terms of being cured of diseases? We can claim an understanding of wellness that is more than being healed of physical infirmities. The physical is but one dimension of wellness. I once visited the husband of a church member who was in his last days of life, ravaged by cancer. His body wasting away and weak, this man yet still conveyed faith-derived, radiant joy and hope. His last words to me: "See you up there."

I left their home with a strong sense that this man was well in Christ indeed.

Another story: a mentor and former professor was given the news that he had terminal cancer. I traveled to his home to spend a few hours with him. He had lost a lot of

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The Wholeness Wheel

What do you do for wellness?

Synod staff share their wellness habits.

Pastor Jack Horner: I do a lot of hiking, walking or working out on an elliptical trainer. Recently, I've been on a calorie-counting diet to lose 20 pounds. Check out www.myfitnesspal.com!

Pastor Kathleen Koran: My new best recovered practice is putting my time off on my calendar and honoring that as I would any meeting or appointment. It's especially important since so much of our work includes Saturday and Sunday, and those are my husband's days off. I try to keep either Sunday or Saturday as a family day. It doesn't always work, but we appreciate the weekends it does, even if we're just hanging out at home. I also checked in with my doctor at the end of December and had all those annual check-ups that I had procrastinated on for several years. And I meet monthly with a spiritual care group of clergy colleagues—they are dear to me!

Sarah Gioe: Watching my once-active grandparents age led me to see regular exercise as crucial to my well-being. I couldn't stand the thought of being trapped in my own body and wanted to ensure that I would maintain my mobility as long as possible, even if that is decades from now. Over the years, my exercise practice has taken different forms depending on what is available and what works best within my lifestyle at the time. Regardless of what form of exercise it is—cardio kickboxing, weightlifting, yoga, running, dance, or just plain walking (one of my favorites!)—my week doesn't feel healthy unless I have incorporated some form of movement. I have found fitness classes to be a terrific way to keep me accountable, vary my workouts, and continually learn new things.

Pastor Jonathan Linman: It may sound strange to say it, but I love the work of gathering the year's financial records in preparation for tax season. How we spend money and on what is part of spirituality, and a budget is a spiritual document. It's fun and revealing to see how it all adds up at the end of the year. Seeing how much goes where helps us budget in the coming year, all of this toward becoming better and more generous stewards of what God has lavished on us.

John Litke: I read a lot, mostly theology and science. I like to repair and build things, and I work outside on the yard and in the gardens.

Kathy Schmidt: Music has always been a central part of my life. My earliest memories are of my mother singing to me and of her singing around the house as she went about the daily tasks of making our house a home. I started singing in choirs even before I learned to read, and with the exception of perhaps one or two years, I have belonged to a choir since then. Singing, whether for church on Sunday mornings, or in a concert setting, is one of the greatest joys in my life. I consider my participation in my church choir to be a wellness activity—the Thursday night rehearsals are a break from the ordinary, a chance to be in community with other music lovers who are also people of faith. The concentration required to sight-read new music every week, exercising control over one's breathing, listening to and blending with the other singers, and the overall camaraderie of the rehearsal experience—all of this helps the everyday stresses of the world to melt away.

Pastor Gary Mills: I go to the gym for 90 minutes four times a week, and drink lots of water (unfortunately that does not offset the chocolate and butter that I love!). I also make sure that I read at least one book/novel (of varied subjects) a week.

Deacon Gayle Ruege: Living on Long Island affords me the opportunity to visit two of our state parks regularly. Walking the boardwalk at Sunken Meadow or Robert Moses State Parks—preferably at sunset—renews and nourishes my body, mind, and spirit.

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weight and was clearly dying. Faced with this reality, what was he doing? He kept on reading the daily papers, listening to Bach cantatas, and writing memoirs of his experience in the church. During my visit we talked about all matters under the sun in the church and in the world. With a radiance emanating from behind his bushy beard he shared with me, “I am intensely curious about what’s next.” I left his home moved by his holistic wellness in Christ, even though disease was about to claim him and his earthly life.

Now I invite you to think about wellness in expansive terms. Being healthy and well in Christ does not mean having the perfect bodies and lives that make the covers of beauty magazines. Remember that Christ’s glorified, resurrected body still bore the marks of his wounds. And God’s peace, or *shalom* in Hebrew, is more than just the absence of conflict. God’s *shalom*, a characteristic of our life in him, involves holistic well-being or wellness for entire communities.

Here is where the Wholeness Wheel becomes a helpful tool to visually convey a broad definition of wellness. Physical well-being is but one dimension. The other dimensions are emotional, social/interpersonal, intellectual, vocational and financial well-being. The brilliance of the Wholeness Wheel is that spiritual well-being is not just one more piece of the pie. Rather, spiritual well-being encompasses the entire wheel and is centered in being a new creation in Christ via baptism. Our physical, emotional, social, intellectual, vocational, and financial states of health have spiritual dimensions and are connected to our baptismal identity in Christ.

Here’s the good news: when we are weak and infirm in one or more dimensions of holistic wellness, then others can compensate and make for greater wellness. This parallels how stronger parts of the body will compensate for other weaker parts. If your left eye is weak, your right one may pick up some slack. So it is with the men in my two stories above: their physical well-being was weak, but their spiritual well-being became ever stronger in the sense of wellness, holistically understood.

A third example: people I met in Tanzania, Africa, suffered from poor financial and physical well-being, but their social and interpersonal well-being was extraordinarily strong, buoyed up by the strength and joy of their faith seen in exuberant worship. You get the picture. We can approach and claim wellness even when we experience weakness and infirmity in certain aspects of our whole life.

How shall we attend to wellness, then? It is not just about diet and exercise. Nurturing wholeness involves giving due attention to all of the parts of life conveyed by the Wholeness Wheel. This issue of *The Lutheran New Yorker* shares how some of our leaders work to nurture wellness in various ways.

Here’s a final point to consider: wellness also has a lot to do with evangelism and mission. How so? Nurturing wellness is a way of giving thanks for God’s lavish, grace-



filled blessings in our lives. By nurturing wellness, we bear witness to the hope that is in us: namely, Jesus Christ, whose baptismal grace makes us a new creation. Our wellness points to Jesus Christ, the Savior, the Healer. In countless ways we carry on, as the church, Jesus’ healing ministry in our own day.

✦ **THE REV. JONATHAN LINMAN, PH.D.** is Assistant to the Bishop for Formation.

Promoting wellness

In 2011, Assistant to the Bishop for Formation Pastor Jonathan Linman convened a large group of clergy and lay leaders who had expressed their interest in formation. Out of that conversation, certain themes were raised up as priorities. One was “wellness promotion,” and a small group was created to consider how to more broadly nurture wellness among our leaders. The Wellness Promotion Table works to promote all aspects of spiritual well-being in what we do as a synod—not necessarily by starting new initiatives, but rather to encourage incorporating wellness themes and practices into existing programs or activities. For more information, visit www.mnys.org/vocation_formation/wellness or contact Pastor Linman at jlinman@mnys.org.



Learning to breathe

Like many seminarians, I found the first year at seminary stressful. Unlike many seminarians, my school sat atop of the Oakland Hills and enjoyed a panoramic view of the San Francisco Bay. Like Forrest Gump, I decided to start running, and that is what I did.

I started to love seminary and particularly love running. I remember running off campus on a six-mile circuit and



coming back feeling refreshed and purified. There is, of course, a chemical explanation for that. I had stimulated the release of all kinds of natural bodily agents that actively worked against the combined variety of bodily symptoms that Hans Selye in 1936 would identify as “stress.”

Twenty years later I am still running. Marathon #11 will be in Vermont this May. My marathon-running started when I sought a goal to really get going with exercise after a life insurance medical exam suggested that my blood pressure was creeping up. The training had the desired effect. It reduced my blood pressure, my cholesterol was good, and I started to feel much perkier. I also felt a sense of achievement when I finished my first marathon.

One of the benefits of distance running is that it creates time. This time, say two to four hours, depending on how long the run is, creates a space that is ideal for prayer and reflection. When I ran the Boston Marathon some years ago, I clenched an Orthodox prayer rope in my hands and prayed for people, particularly parishioners, as I ran. At each mile I said a sincere prayer of thanks that I had somehow managed another mile.

Exercise can easily be turned to prayer as illustrated by the mantra “Thank you, Jesus.” It is a great aid to controlling breathing. Two long syllables, inhale. Two long syllables, exhale.

Breathing has been an exciting discovery of my exercise odyssey. For instance, I took up karate to help with my flexibility for running. I was very stiff and arrhythmic at first. My *sensei* is always reminding me to breathe. When I breathe properly, my *kata* (forms) and sparring (fighting) both improve dramatically.

The assistant coach at my dojo placed in my hand a book called *Chi Running*. There is a wonderful principle in this book about “cotton and steel.” Early in my distance running, I was steel all the time. Every muscle was taut



Pastor Stephens leads the invocation before the Toughman Half Ironman Triathlon in September 2011.

even if that was not needed. The practice of cotton signifies that anything that does not need to be engaged should be relaxed.

The cotton and steel principle goes everywhere with me. As a pastor, I hope to be cotton towards my parishioners—they are not my enemies. Sometimes, briefly, one needs to stiffen the sinew, summon the blood, and become steel. After that, though, relax and exhale, become cotton and seek Christ in all.

My counseling clients hear a lot about cotton and steel, because like most New Yorkers, they are always steel. We talk about being cotton, borrowing principles from yoga and mindfulness. Life may be tough, but in this very moment, by the grace of God I have everything I need—the next breath.

The other blessing of exercise, other than lungfuls of God’s good air, is that even solo sports promote koinonia or fellowship. As I train for distance runs, I run with a small handful of people and we learn to trust and encourage one another, and borrow mutual strength. Even the lonely gym rat experiences a certain esprit de corps.

My great koinonia is with my wonderful congregation in Croton-on-Hudson. With most marathons I raise money for concerns from Save Darfur to Run2Feed, Lutheran Social Services of New York’s program. My congregation and friends are very supportive. Over the last three years I have competed in the Toughman Half Ironman Triathlon run from Croton-on-Hudson (1.1 mile swim, 56 miles of bum-numbing bicycling, and 13.1 miles of running). Beside the Hudson, before the event, I in my wetsuit offer an invocation. Just 1.73 miles from the beach, 600 of my new friends and I run past my church where parishioners offer encouragement and Gatorade.

By the way, I am by no means an athlete, but I am learning to breathe, and I think that is the lesson of exercise.

✦ THE REV. ANTHONY STEPHENS, PH.D. is pastor of *Our Saviour, Croton-on-Hudson* and staff psychotherapist with *Lutheran Counseling Center*.

Congregations can be well too!

It’s not just individuals that can be well! Congregations can be well also. This spring, check out a Healthy Congregations workshop near you. Healthy Congregations is a series of six five-hour workshops that introduces “systems thinking” to congregational leaders. Participants explore the effects of anxiety and conflict on an emotional system (the congregation), and then begin to identify and practice skills for healthy leadership in an era of rapid cultural change and challenge.

Healthy Congregations is not a “fix-it” program for a congregation in conflict, but an introduction to a way of thinking and understanding our relationships and inter-relatedness. The focus is on helping our church strengthen ministry by strengthening leaders. Individual congregations, clusters, and conferences are encouraged to plan for these workshops in your area. Trained facilitators in our synod are ready to help congregations host and lead these workshops. Themes include:

1. Creating Healthy Congregations
2. Healthy Congregations Respond to Anxiety and Change
3. Leadership in Healthy Congregations
4. Relationships in Healthy Congregations
5. Healthy Congregations Develop Generous People
6. Spiritual Care of Healthy Congregations

Contact Pastor Kathleen Koran, Assistant to the Bishop for Congregations, at kkoran@mnys.org for more information or visit www.mnys.org/events to see the Healthy Congregations workshops scheduled for this year.

Free to be— Rejoicing Spirits

*So that there should be no division in the body,
but that its parts should have equal concern for
each other.*

—1 Corinthians 12:25

Since 2010, Oceanside Lutheran Church (OLC) has been on a journey of inclusion. We built a ramp and an accessible bathroom, removed pews for wheelchairs, and renovated the altar area to accommodate people with different mobilities. But something was still missing.

The simple fact is that we began to see how our worship was generally not meeting the needs our differently-abled disciples. We could change the building all we wanted, but if the message wasn't shared in a way that met the needs of the people gathered, then we weren't doing our job.

Some of the lack of worship accessibility in our culture comes out of a mistaken belief that differently-abled individuals do not have the capacity to experience, express, or deepen their spirituality. This belief is silently woven through the subconscious of our churches and our society. Yet, at the same time, as people of faith, we know the truth: that our spirits are not dependent on our cognitive abilities, but instead are an innate part of who we are as human beings. To put that truth into practice, we had to take a look at the underlying beliefs we held as individuals and as a community.

As a result, Rejoicing Spirits was born: an OLC ministry in which the Holy Spirit would guide us in ways we could not have imagined.

Rejoicing Spirits is a national movement founded by St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Exton, Pennsylvania, in 2003 and continues to spread across the nation to Christian



churches of varying denominations. Oceanside is the 26th congregation to join this network of inclusion.

The Rejoicing Spirits ministry reaches out to enrich the spiritual lives of individuals with developmental different abilities along with their families, friends, and other supportive community members. Individuals are free to be themselves while actively participating as contributing members of an inclusive faith community.

Debbie Chapman, Rejoicing Spirits Ministry Coordinator and Congregation Council President, says, "There are so many reasons for local residents to join in this faith and fellowship experience. We have music and singing; brief, concrete, and meaningful messages; and plenty of opportunities to participate, serve, learn, and lead. All worshippers are encouraged to serve as worship leaders. The 'no shushing and no apologies policy' gives all who attend the freedom to worship as God intended."

The result has been an incredible blessing. Rejoicing Spirits Worship is held the third Sunday of every month at 4:00pm. Additionally, we've started to consider how to be more inclusive and accessible in our weekly Sunday morning worship as well.

In our outreach, we've approached a variety of schools, churches, group homes, and day care programs. We've heard many stories of people being excluded overtly or covertly from worship throughout their lives, from people who had to leave wheelchair-bound siblings behind when the family went to church because there was no physical accessibility to people asked by clergy not to return until they could better control their outbursts. The more we delve into this ministry, the more doors God is opening. It has been a bittersweet journey of painful stories and self-realizations that has led to joyful worship and extravagant grace, blessing and enlivening our congregation and community.

This journey started out as a Spirit-led desire to be a place where people feel intentionally welcome and included; a place where all people feel like they matter in God's family—as they are, not as others think they should be.

+ THE REV. DANIELLE MILLER is pastor of Oceanside Lutheran Church.

What's our future?

Across our synod, leaders are deeply concerned about declining membership and aging buildings. The church has been so marked by changes in population, demographics, participation, and finances over the past decade that the 2011 Synod Assembly voted to develop a forward-looking strategic planning process to address such changes. The resolution asked that the plan be presented in one year, at the 2012 Synod Assembly.

Planning began right away, with the Executive Committee responsible for the process and development. The committee began by hiring Daxko consultant Tom Massey to guide us. Understanding that the strength of our synod begins at the congregational level, our synod invited all congregations to share their insights and ideas through a simple survey last fall. Hundreds of church members answered the following questions:

- What is your congregation's most important asset, characteristic, value, or impact?
- What do you think is the most significant issue facing your congregation over the next few years?
- What is your dream for your congregation?

The Executive Committee also identified common themes from prior surveys. After all the data and input was collected and analyzed, a draft plan was developed during the winter. The draft plan is to be reviewed and tested this spring, with a final plan being presented to the 2012 Synod Assembly, taking place May 17-19. The goal: to develop a clear, compelling direction for the future of the Metropolitan New York Synod.

For the latest about the planning process, visit www.mnys.org > Who We Are > Strategic Planning. For complete information about the upcoming Synod Assembly, visit www.mnys.org > Who We Are > Annual Assembly.

Encouraging leader wellness

Ask your pastor (and his or her spouse) if he or she has taken the annual Mayo Clinic Health Assessment. While this easy, confidential survey is only for leaders with ELCA-primary health coverage, their participation affects all of us! If 65% of our eligible leaders (118 people) take the health assessment by April 30, the synod would collectively net approximately \$34,000 in health care savings. Your congregation could pay 2% less on health contributions for all of 2012. Each year, our participation grows—last year 52% of our eligible leaders participated. Could this be the year for us to reach the 65% benchmark?

Taking the health assessment is one way that leaders can earn money for their personal wellness accounts—which means significant financial savings on health care. Other leaders have appreciated the personal coach and wellness resources provided by the Mayo Clinic. The health assessment is online at www.elcaforwellness.org.



Viewpoint *Clergy participate in the laying on of hands at December's festival ordination. Five new pastors were ordained at Cathedral of the Incarnation.*



PHOTO BY BOB WILLIAMS

Balance, wholeness, wellness



Since October I've been feeling that my life has been out of balance. I have had recurrent pain in my hip and lightheadedness (no surprise to some, I'm sure!). Then, in early February, it all peaked in an emergency appendectomy, a round of antibiotics, and painkillers. Why am I telling you this? My purpose is to declare a vital truth that I have discovered: "wellness" is, largely, a matter of balance.

Many people talk about this lack of balance. It's a common complaint experienced and stated in different ways. For example, as my mother would say, "They're out of kilter." After my recent health challenges I can vouch for this imbalance as a felt reality. Sometimes you feel lopsided. Sometimes you feel overly full. Sometimes you feel completely empty. You know what I mean?

There is an old proverb (I believe it's Indian) that says that everyone is a house with many rooms. Sounds like Jesus talking about his Father's "many mansions." The point is that we are physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual beings—plus a few other things, in a few other rooms. Most of us tend to live in one room most of the time, but unless we go into every room every day, even if only to open a window and keep it aired out, we are not complete. When we are sick, we are stuck in one room. We are "out of kilter," we are not well, not whole. We are disoriented. We are strangely unaware that simple disciplines of attention to these various conditions can restore balance and well-being to a remarkable degree. During my recuperation I actually had our piano tuned (and that therapy was helpful to my healing, believe me)!

I think this "house with many rooms" is the essence of God's gift of *shalom*. This wellness, wholeness, and peace are truly beyond understanding. Although we seek it diligently, the world offers little serenity. Possessions may bring a temporary sense of calm, but we all know that even massive buildings can crumble in a moment.

Family and friends can be peaceful companions until trouble erupts and harmony blows up. Hard work and a good reputation can promote feelings of well-being until the unexpected happens.

Let us not overlook the gifts of God that await us in the many rooms of our house! Let us get a glimpse of God's *shalom* that is beyond our comprehension because it comes from the Eternal Source of undeserved

*"Wellness" is, largely,
a matter of balance.*

love and redemption, the Source too deep to explain. And let us give thanks for God's mercy that transports us to a different place, a room which is the realm of tranquility, where our hearts can rest in the peace of Jesus.

Many of you know that I am particularly fond of a prayer of Dame Julian of Norwich. This prayer uplifted me often during my recuperation, as I have explored new rooms in my own spirit, and rested in the *shalom* God gives. I invite you join me in praying:

In you, Father all-mighty, we have our preservation and our bliss. In you, Christ, we have our restoring and our saving. You are our mother, brother, and savior. In you, our Lord the Holy Spirit, is marvelous and plenteous grace. You are our clothing; for love you wrap us and embrace us. You are our maker, our lover, our keeper. Teach us to believe that by your grace all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well. Amen.

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