

Address to the 'Mind and Spirit Conference 2007'

**Co-organised by 'Interact',
The South Essex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust
and North Essex NHS Mental Health Partnership
at Shire Hall, Chelmsford, 5.2.2007**

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It is a very great privilege to be asked to make an initial contribution to this important conference. Let me begin by congratulating those who have organised this day and paying tribute to the quiet but effective work done by InterAct.

It was often assumed that human beings had immortal souls and that at death they flew off to the realms of heaven or hell according to your beliefs and assessment of the performance in life of the person concerned. It may come even as a shock to you to discover that Christians do not necessarily believe in the eternal soul. Our faith in God is about resurrection – and the life of the whole person. C.S.Lewis captures this truth beautifully in his book 'The Great Divorce' that describes his wartime dream of the bus journey to Heaven – a place much more real than life in the present – more solid and full of whole people.

What we do believe in, therefore, is the unity of the human person made in the image of God and carrying that sacred dignity which the stamp of God upon our being gives to every person. The whole person is a unity of body, mind and spirit. When you touch any one of these faces of our living, you touch the whole person.

We have got used to dividing them up. There are people like the medical profession who deal with the body. Others, the 'shrinks', who deal with the mind and yet others – people with spiritual and religious interests who look after the soul. Bookshops have shelves full of books for each part.

Yet we know these divisions are not always helpful to us. We can tell that a person is under stress and depressed by their 'body language'. That may well link with the spiritual journey that sometimes takes us through what has been called 'the dark night of the soul'. St. John of the Cross gave us this experience from his own deep and harrowing journey of following a suffering Saviour.

We are, therefore, in our own time beginning to learn to see people as whole persons and, in our duty one to another, to take care for them as such.

The second thing we are learning today is to enjoy the difference that makes each person unique. Cultures can tend to require conformity to accepted norms of conduct and to exclude those who do not fit in. Of course, the easiest way for such cultures to cope is to put people away – out of sight – in prisons, homes and mental institutions. How recent it is that we have moved away from such solutions to the challenge of difference at least in the field of mental health. We are beginning to recognise that difference is good and that we must take care not to make value judgements. Every person is, without exception, made in the image of God, and his or her life is to be valued for what it is. The terrible heresy

of the 20th century that led to the Holocaust and the slaughter of so many whose lives did not fit the Aryan doctrine of supremacy and perfection has driven us, step by step, to policies and education designed to enable every person to be valued.

Today's conference is about these two themes: firstly, the whole person – not just Mind and Spirit but Body, Mind and Spirit. That truth calls us to talk together across the disciplines of our lives to ensure human flourishing today. Secondly, to enjoy the people God has created and given to us to form our community today and to ensure that all are included, recognized and encouraged to offer what only they can offer for the building of our common life.

There is one more thing pertinent to our context. It is this. When we gather together in one place people with a shared interest in the unity of human life as God has created it, we find ourselves a gathering of people who seek to contribute these truths into the society of which we are a part through our own voluntary endeavour. The challenge of difference and of those who might so easily be squeezed out of proper provision is taken up by people of faith and vision and values. Those who represent the interests of the state – the public sector local and national – would be wise to see how vital such work is to the building of a decent society in the future. It really is time to begin to explore the inter-relations of the different faces of human life and human caring. If we do not attend to the spiritual needs of all people and seek ways of enabling them to find enrichment as a result, we are failing in our duty to one another. As Christians have learnt over the centuries, it is not much good mending the soul if we forget the needs of the body. Today we might reverse that and say, with confidence, mending the body and caring for the mind is not going to lead to the full flourishing of human life unless we also attend to the spiritual needs of the person as well. NHS and arguments about chaplaincy take note!

This is a vital contribution that can only be made from within the energy and resources of the whole community. Coming together to see what together we can offer must be good news – especially for all who might be at risk of cultural stereotyping and even exclusion.

I am so pleased we are here for this conversation today. May God give us good friendship and fresh insight as we travel through this conference.

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