

## Health and the Independent Churches

The Independent Churches are making a massive contribution towards the health of the nation that is not sufficiently recognised. There are several thousand Independent Churches in South Africa and many more further up in the continent. Some are small congregations, and others are very large organisations with the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) the largest, having several million members.

Although there is great variation amongst the different groups with regard to doctrine and the degree to which they adhere to the biblical tenants of the Christian faith, the majority have a strong emphasis on healing. The vast majority of the membership have joined one of these churches as a result of a healing experience. The healing in general is officiated by a prophet-healer within the context of a gathering of the congregation. At times they will go to live within the fellowship and care of the congregation for a period, so that the healing and rehabilitation process can be effected. Health is seen in its broadest sense. Some are healed from the inability to get and hold down a job, another to restore a broken marriage, another for the treatment of infertility and yet another to be cured from alcoholism.

I recently had the privilege of listening to a talk given by a medical doctor who is a member of the ZCC. They not only operate at the curative level but have a good understanding of prevention and health promotion. They emphasize peace, hope and love. They promote self esteem and respect for others. They teach self discipline and have an uncompromising stand against the use of alcohol and smoking. All this must contribute to a major health protective effect in the

several million membership of the ZCC alone. They must know something about personal hygiene and the management of large gatherings as well. I am not aware of any violence or serious epidemic related to the annual Easter gathering at Moria near Pietersburg, where up to a million people gather for the weekend.

The movement, as it is presently constituted, dates from 1925 and its precursors from 1910. Many of our patients visit the ZCC or one of the other independent churches with their illness. Will it make a difference to the outcome of our therapy if we were more aware of these prophet-healers? Many of us continue blissfully unaware of their existence, others discourage patients to make use of these healers.

This is the month of December. The month of the Christ Feast. Let us greet one another with the greeting of the ZCC; "Peace be unto you" and with the response, "let the peace multiply and ramify in the community".

Shalom!

*Sam Fehsen*