Introduction

For the first time in the history of the World Council of Churches' Assemblies, Vancouver 1983 devoted the work of a major study group to the discussion of the healing ministry of the Church, namely in Issue 4: "Healing and Sharing Life in Community". This fact marks a new prominence of this topic for missiological studies today and underlines the need to set aside the proposed Workshop 5 on "The Church as a Healing Community" in the VI IAMS Conference under the general theme "Christian Mission and Human Transformation".

One may wonder why this issue gains in significance only now since
- Old and New Testament provide ample references to healing acts,
- in his earthly ministry, Jesus was more healing than preaching,
- both preaching and healing are emphasized in the Great Commission,
- Church History documents various methods of Christian healings,
- Christian missions were concerned with medical care, and recently
- African Independent Churches excelled in their healing ministry.

However, there are particular periods in which the people of God is enlightened by special insights, and our time may be the Kairos to rediscover the healing capacity of the Church. Following the grievous debates on evangelization which resulted in a deplorable polarization, a sound theological study of this topic may also have healing consequences to the global Christian family.

State of the Question

All over the world, people discuss the crisis of Western medicine. This debate concentrates on its financial viability and the problem of a just distribution of modern health services to all mankind. It takes it, however, for granted that the principles of Western medicine are correct and therefore the adequate instruments to solve the global health problems. Approximately 25% of the world population are reached by Western medicine in our days. Most medical experts regard it as a steering problem only to extend its services also to the so far unreached people.

Christians have to ask the more radical question whether perhaps a completely different concept of basic health services may be appropriate from consideration, in 'Third World' and in Western countries. What is the Christian understanding of health, sickness and healing? The main points to be kept in mind in dealing with this topic seem to be:
- The wholistic\(^1\) concept of man as potential 'son' of God,
- That God is the source of all healing, and
- The sources of disease and healing in the individual, in society,
  in our relationship with the ecology and in the spiritual ambience.

In the course of our inquiry, we cannot avoid critical questions to
- the undiscriminating use of Western medicine in Christian missions,
- the commercialization of health services in Western civilization,
- the religious or ideological premises of traditional medicine,
- the beliefs about health from other cultures and belief systems
  (African, Ayurvedic/Unani, Melanesian, to name a few) and the
  contributions of their healing practices, and/or
- the unreflected use of ancient patterns of spiritual healing.

For no crisis can be overcome without objective criticism.

These problems cannot be solved by isolated academic studies in the
ivory tower. It is the proprium of missiological studies to test
their results on the touchstone of the realities, the life of the
Church and its witness to Christ relevant to the context of the
people, whether they are church members or believers of other living
faiths.

Important aspects to be dealt with

The pivotal issue in this inquiry appears to be the understanding
of the term "health". It may be difficult to find a generally
satisfying definition. However, it will be rewarding to compare
different current statements, e.g. the all embracing one of the
World Health Organization (WHO) regarding health as "a state of
complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the
absence of disease or infirmity", the dynamic one from the Tübingen
I Consultation (1964) declaring that "health, in the Christian
understanding, is a continuous and victorious encounter with the
powers that deny the existence and goodness of God. It is a part-
icipation in an invasion of the realm of evil, in which the final
victory lies beyond death, but the power of that victory is known
now in the gift of the life-giving Spirit. It is a kind of life
which has overcome death and the anxiety which is the shadow of
death. Whether in the desperate squalor of overpopulated and
underdeveloped areas, or in the spiritual wasteland of affluent
societies, it is a sign of God's victory and a summons to his
service", or the broad working definition by the Christian Medical

\(^1\)Note: To cut short the ongoing dispute whether to spell wholistic
or holistic, the former orthography is used all through the
paper with the tacit understanding that we do not refer to
special concepts (e.g. Granger Westberg and others).