

Health

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tant church in another city were asked to pray daily for 10 of the children. The other eight received the same medical treatment but no prayer.

After 15 months of prayer, seven of the 10 children prayed for were still alive, and only two of the eight in the control group had survived.

Other studies reviewed by the scientists focused on the germination of seeds and growth of seedlings, eliminating many of the variables inherent in studying human beings. Those studies consistently found that positive prayer increased growth by 5 percent to 35 percent over those seeds not prayed for.

"A complication making impossible a facile interpretation of the results was the fact that prayer for 'no growth' also seemed to result in more successful germination and growth," Duckro and Magaletta noted.

The St. Louis researchers made several suggestions for future studies linking prayer and health.

"Critical to such future endeavors will be a thorough knowledge of the disease being studied and strict control for the effect of variables other than prayer which are related to outcome," they said.

They also urged consideration of "whether some types of prayer, or some persons praying, might be more effective than others" and closer research on the frequency and duration of prayer in the studies.

"The association of religious faith and physical health has been demonstrated in a wealth of studies," they said. "Now more than ever before, both science and religion seem ready to open up previously protected assumptions to empirical observation."

Dossey, who co-chairs the panel on mind-body interventions in the Office of Alternative Therapy at the National Institutes of Health, looked at 130 scientific studies on the effects of prayer in healing. More than half showed that prayer dramatically improved the health of the person or object prayed for, he said.

Although some doctors are "intellectually allergic" to the idea, scientific studies have shown that prayer "makes living things healthier," according to physician and author Larry Dossey.

Dossey's book, "Healing Words: The



Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine," recently published by Harper San Francisco, details the results of more than 130 scientific studies on the effects of prayer in healing. More than half of the experiments showed that prayer dramatically improved the health of the person or object prayed for.

Some dismiss the results of studies on prayer for human subjects by linking them to the effects of "the power of suggestion" or "positive thinking," Dossey said. But when bacteria, fungi, rats and germinating seeds grow faster when they are prayed over, "it's a very powerful demonstration that leapfrogs all the complaints raised," he said.

The former chief of staff at Medical City Dallas Hospital gave up his medical practice several years ago to write and do research on the effects of prayer in healing. He currently co-chairs the panel on mind/body interventions in the Office of Alternative Therapy at the National Institutes of Health.

That little-known office, set up by Congress in 1992, is charged with looking into a variety of alternatives to drugs and surgery — imagery, hypnosis, biofeedback, art, dance and music therapy, yoga and prayer, among others.

"I was utterly delighted" when the office was established, Dossey said. "I didn't think anyone at NIH knew there was such a thing as prayer being used to promote healing."

The office has so far given grants of about \$20,000 to \$40,000 each to some 25 studies of various alternative treatments, including one to Dr. Scott Walker, a psychiatrist with the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque who is

looking into the value of intercessory prayer on patients involved in drug and alcohol rehabilitation.

Dossey sees the value of the office as primarily symbolic at this point. "Some in NIH wish it (the office) would go away, but there have been some very influential scientists at NIH who have stood up in support" of alternative therapies, he said.

"If you can talk about these studies at NIH — which pretty much defines how medicine is practiced in the United States — then you can talk about them anywhere," he added.

"Most Americans would say it's about time," Dossey said, noting that a 1990 study by Dr. David Eisenberg showed that one-third of all Americans participated in some sort of alternative therapy that year, spending a total of \$14 billion.

The 131 studies described in his book have several things in common, Dossey said. "They show that no particular religion has a monopoly on how to pray or who to pray to" and that physical distance is no obstacle to effective intercessory prayer, he said.

There does seem to be a "skill factor" involved, since "people who have prayed for 20 years are more effective than those who have never prayed before," Dossey said. But those with no experience can also have good effects, he said. "It's not limited to some special elite group of prayers."

The studies also found that those who pray that "God's will be done" rather than for a specific outcome often have more success, he added.

He urges his fellow physicians to "loosen up on this subject" and to look at the scientific data about prayer.

Soul

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come to the Mass Friday evening, but if no one is physically healed — yet all leave feeling closer to Christ — then Father McAlear will consider the evening a total success.

"This is not coming out of a desire to be spectacular or make money," he said, explaining his ministry. "Jesus heals out of compassion."

Father McAlear spoke of Jesus's healing in the present tense because He did not end His healing ministry with the end of His earthly life, the St. Louis priest emphasizes. The Savior continues to work wonders and miracles through people like Father McAlear who are chosen to be instruments of the Lord's work, the priest said.

That work is as old as the Acts of the Apostles, the priest continued, quoting the fourth chapter of Acts as evidence of his ministry's roots in the Gospel.

In that chapter, Ss. Peter and John have returned to their group of believers after being warned by Jerusalem's religious leaders to preach no longer. The believers then pray: "And now Lord, take notice of the threats they have made, and allow us, your servants, to speak your message with all boldness. Reach out your hand to heal, and grant that wonders and miracles may be performed through the name of your holy Servant Jesus."

Father McAlear stresses his ministry's roots in the Gospel because he sees two tendencies in today's world as undermining Christian healing's uniqueness.

One tendency is found in the "New Age" movement, the priest said. Healing is seen as a manipulation of energy fields and auras around a person, he said, adding that he sees such healing as evidence of human — not divine — power.

A second tendency is found among Catholics and Protestants who believe that the potential for healing depends on the believer's faith. Some Christians will go so far as to tell other Christians to forgo medical treatment in order to show the Lord that one has enough faith to be healed by Him.

"That's making faith — and not Christ — the instrument of your healing," Father McAlear said. "I'll pray in faith in Christ with you, but I'll still tell you to check with your doctor."

Christ will heal who He wants to heal, the priest emphasized, noting that, at the end of the day, discarded crutches and disappearing tumors are not the point of the church's healing ministry anyway.

"Healing is of the person's inner being," Father McAlear said. "If your spirit isn't raised, if your heart's not touched, if you don't have a deeper sense of love, then it's just a waste of time."

EDITORS' NOTE: For more details on Father McAlear's visit to St. Louis Church in Pittsford, call Dick Pelino at 716/223-2857, or Elsie Davis at 716/586-7542.

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