

Health and faith communities: Salvation here and now, not just in heaven.

Featuring Rev. Willis Steele, MDiv.

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Rolf: You're listening to the Health Disparities Podcast from Movement Is Life. Conversations about health disparities with people who are working to eliminate them. I'm Rolf Taylor and today I'm discussing health disparities and faith communities with Reverend Willis Steele. Reverend Steele, you work with a couple of organizations. Would you like to just tell us a little bit about your work with the church and, also, with your company.

Willis: So, I have been an advocate for the rights of patients, people living at risk of certain illnesses over the years and, currently, am the regional lead for advocacy relations for my company outside of the US, Latin America, Turkey, the Middle East, South Africa and Canada, but the lion share of my work is done in those developing companies that I mentioned. My wife and I also pastor a church in Camarillo, California, and we have a good blend of congregants and members who are professionals or they're in sororities and fraternities, young people or maybe they've been in town 66 years. I just learned from one couple, military, because we're near a military base, naval base, it's important for me because the swath of people that I work with come from all walks of life, but we all have things, if you will, that, as a person working in a helping role, whether it's as pastor

or the advocacy lead for my company, I can do something to help them enrich their own lives.

Rolf: I understand you have a very strong tie with Grace Baptist Church in New York.

Willis: So, my wife actually was called to ministry in an affiliate of Grace Baptist Church in another town, Yonkers, New York and she was my intern while I was responsible for interns in my first assignment as an associate pastor in Harlem, where I met Dr. W. Franklin Richardson, the first time, who came as a guest preacher. But, ironically, a couple of years later, I met my wife. We dated for a couple of years. We became engaged, got married and shortly after we got married, her church in Yonkers, New York, which was affiliated with Grace, we were both called to pastor the church in Yonkers, which kind of solidified my relationship with Dr. Richardson working with his youth, his young people, his singles and his couples ministries.

Rolf: So, Grace Baptist Church has embraced health for the congregation. Could you share a little background about when this started to happen and what the church has put in place, and most importantly, how you feel it's impacted you and the congregation.

Willis: My home church, Abyssinian Baptist Church where I'm ordained in Harlem was doing the same thing all those years back. Abyssinian led a seven-church coalition in Harlem that addressed health issues every single year that I was a part of the ministry in Abyssinian. Then, when I went to Memorial Baptist Church in Harlem, my first assignment, Memorial was doing the same thing, and the pastor there led the Harlem Congregations for Community Improvements, which is where a group called the Bomb in Gilead was birthed. Now, I'm at Grace and Grace is doing the same thing in Westchester County and in the Northern Bronx, and that impacted me because my wife and I were able to bring the spirit of those things we had learned over the years, before we had gotten ministry, just as church members, then, as junior pastors or associate pastors to our own church. So, the influence has been across the whole spectrum of our ministry engagement and it has helped us make sure that it's top of the spectrum for our members, at our church, even, now, in Camarillo.

Rolf: Why would you say that health has become so central in communities of faith?

Willis: I would say it's becoming more central and I say becoming because every church is not onboard with the health. They still believe it's just that you preach the gospel, you preach the Bible, you preach Jesus, as we do, you preach and teach about God, and that's it. I will tell you for those pastors

who have an understanding, salvation is a centerpiece of the Christian faith. But we have an understanding that it is salvation on a spiritual level, yes, but, also, salvation that speaks to the tangible needs of the people of God. That's what Jesus taught. Salvation for your spiritual being, yes, so that there's a reconciliation between you and God, but, as importantly, if you look at the history of Jesus in the New Testament. When you look at his sermon on the Mount. When you look at his parables. He taught my illustration to the people, and then, later explained those illustrations in minute detail to his disciples, but it was because he was healing the sick, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, making the blind see, the deaf hear, etc. So, think about this. He did all those things that were healing people, transforming their situation, but he also did things that transformed people's lives so that they were living better. Feeding someone doesn't mean that they're sick. They're hungry. But think about that, we're called not to just address the soul's needs. We called to address the tangible needs. So, the reason you're seeing a shift where pastors and other faith leaders do get it is because they're latching onto the spirit of what Jesus did by addressing salvation, not just spiritually, but in a tangible need. And, I'll say one more thing there. If you're hungry, I can pray with you until you're blue in the face. It doesn't put food in your belly. If you're naked and I have a closet full of clothes, or my congregants have a closet full of clothes they're not using, it doesn't change the situation by just praying for the person who needs clothes. Someone has to go to the

closet, take out some of those clothes they're not wearing and share them. If you need a ride and I have a car and you don't and you don't have carfare, praying that you get a way to work or to your next appointment doesn't miraculously bring a jetliner, a train, a bus or another car. If I've got the car, then, I bloody well need to get in the car, offer you a ride and take you with. That's salvation for that person in that moment and, again, that's why you see the change.

Rolf: I guess what you're saying where the shift is taking place is that the role of the church is moving from getting people to Heaven, to actually, in the here and now, not getting to Heaven quite so quickly. I would argue it's not moving from getting people into Heaven, we still have to do that, but it's shifting to allowing people to understand that God intends for people to live well here on Earth, as well. If there's a way to bring salvation to a situation, you do that in whatever ways you can, and a lot of times, that's providing information on bad health or bad diet or bad practices, if you will. Not to condemn a person. Not to lambast a person. To put it into perspective, it is important for pastoral leaders to address the sin, if you will, or the situation. Not necessarily attack the person who may be caught up in a situation. That's the only way to bring relief.

Rolf: So, what are some of the most important or challenging health disparities that are affecting the congregations in the churches that you're working closely with?

Willis: I would tell you in my church and in my community, right now, it is immobility. A number of the people who live in the county that I live in, although it's sunny and the beach is a 10-minute drive from so many people's homes, you can be outdoors more than you can be in and be comfortable because you have a more steady, warmer climate. People, as they age, are still impacted by joint pain in their knees, joint pain in their hips, you know, osteoarthritis. I have one member who is the most wonderful person you ever want to meet, sweet as pie, but there are some days she cannot make it out to church, especially, if it rains because her knees hurt so badly. I have another member who's pushing 78 and, unfortunately, he got one knee replacement addressed, stalled on getting the other one done, and, now, he's confined or he's resolved that he'll never be able to walk, normally, again because he didn't take the time to get the second knee done, but, guess what, now, he's suffering with diabetes. He's also suffering with high blood pressure and sedentary lifestyle because he can't move about as easily with a bad knee. And so, those are just two examples of many people that I see in the faith community and broader community that have joint pain issues. So, we have a big issue in our county, in our church and our church is leading this

effort to really help people think through diet, think through exercising, think through walking more readily, riding bicycles, being out and about, and I'll give you an example of that, maybe later. The point is you have to address the need of how these people are dealing with the challenges of mobility in their life. So, we're committed to doing that while we continue to feed them spiritually.

Rolf: So, you have very strong messages about exercise, movement, nutrition, what about things like mental health?

Willis: Absolutely. Mental health is not a dirty word in Faith Mission. That's our church. We talk about mental health. We talk about therapy. We let people know that there are some things that we certainly will provide, pastoral counseling, care for, but there are some things that we may not be the expert in that may require a deeper level of professional care. That's the way we frame it, professional care, and it's speaking to the professional care of the mind. We teach our church members that therapy is not a dirty word.

Rolf: So, that's not seen as being in conflict with faith and prayer?

Willis: Absolutely, not. We teach that the more whole of a person that you are, mentally, emotionally, physically, the more whole you can be spiritually.

When you take off the barriers, when you remove the layers of, even emotion that hides pain or challenges that you may have faced, even if it's a physical barrier, the more you remove those barriers and those layers, the better you're able to have that oneness with God, as we understand him from our faith perspective because you can put more focus and energy on the time that you spend with God in our understanding.

Rolf: So, you have a very strong set of messages around behavioral change and that's working at a grassroots level, really working in a direct connection with those individuals. Could you comment, a little bit about, what kind of work you're doing at a policy level to affect more structural change?

Willis: I deal with policy, but I want to give you this example that I promised. We have a lot of young adults and young people in the church. We do a lot of activities with them outside of the church. But, very quickly we learned, because this is a new congregation for us, about a year old, we don't have an activity for the young people that's not intergenerational. The "why" is because we encourage mobility. So, if we're going to go to a museum, which we've done, and walk for three or four hours, how invaluable is that to pipe the interest of a more senior person in the church who has some mobility issues, who doesn't get out of the house, as much, when you've got young people there who can assist, who can walk with them, who can

be life to them, with them, as we go on these journeys. And so, making sure whether it's miniature golf, whether it's a trip to the beach, a museum or a lunch out in West Hollywood or Venice Beach, the seniors are excited about the fact that they're engaging with the young people in the church, which brings me to policy. The policy piece is important for us because we address the young people to be the brainchild of the policy efforts that we can help impact change on. For example, we have a webinar coming up. It happens to be on mortgage lending issues that entrap people, if you will, but it's not just the leadership that's getting on the webinar with other clergy and counsel people, it's young people because they can grasp stuff a little bit more quickly, if you will, because of their youngness of mind, in some cases. And yet, the seniors are able to get that message from maybe the deacon or one of the pastors who's on the call. But how invaluable is it that a young person can sit down with a senior and say, "Mother or Father or Mr. So-and-So or Mrs. So-and-So, here's what the call was about. Here's something we think you ought to look at to make sure you're protected. When there's a council person or a senator or a mayor in the area that's doing something that we feel doesn't speak to the needs of our people, it is important to write letters. It is important for people to send emails and make phone calls. And, you know, the people who are more senior are very apt at making a phone call because those calls are logged, just like a letter or email is. So, we've taught them to use their voice and while we're not suggesting, based on the separation of

church and state, that we, as a church body, take a position, a political position, to the left or the right or the center of anything, we encourage people to be informed about policies that impact our community, and their individual lives. You know, there's a council meeting coming up on the 28th. In fact, there was a council meeting last night in our community. We simply encourage every member to take the opportunity, go the council meeting, listen, look at the issue, and this is redistricting in our county or in our town, rather, look at the issue, and if you have questions or concerns that is the time to get your concern or your question on the record, and get the answers that you're looking for, for those who are supposed to be leading our particular city.

Rolf: It sounds like your kind of intergenerational emphasis is a very neat solution to the digital divide making sure that technology is accessible to older generations.

Willis: Yeah, because when it comes to church and local community behavioral change, you know, it's important to overcome the digital divide, but we have to be realist. Some of our seniors still have flip phones, a number of them, and they're not going to change. I have one senior who's retired, who drives for private car dealerships. He might drive to Arizona tonight and come back in two days and he's going down from our county to Temecula or San Diego or Palm Springs, but, guess what? He likes to

use navigation, but he doesn't have a smartphone. So, if it's not in the car, he's got a map or he's got his flip phone, which he's figured out how to use navigation on that. His reasoning is mobile smartphones today give him too much to deal with. There's too much going on. It's too busy for him. So, how do we address someone like that when we're creating an app for people to do their offerings on to make it simple if they left their checkbook or something. Or, there's some messaging that they can look at on a computer that may not be in print format. Unfortunately, some things we do have to print for them. If they don't have a computer at home that they're actively using and they don't have a smartphone, the solution is, for an example, best example, when we're having an event and we ask people to register and that registration is web based, the young people are able to printout a form, allow them to fill it out, fill it out with them, and then, enter it on the computer. So, they're registered just like everyone else. The California Museum of Arts. If you want to register as a group, it's web based or phone. It's easier for us to do our thing on a computer. So, we let the people who don't have a computer, register on a paper format, that the young people help create, and then, add them into the system, so, they're not excluded. So, that's the important thing. Whether it's health information, whether it's financial information, whatever it is, we have to bridge the gap in our own way, so that everybody is included, and no one is excluded.

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Rolf: Reverend Steele, thank you so much for sharing those insights. You've got one foot in New York and another foot in California, and then, your third foot somewhere in South America. It's quite impressive, the reach that you have.

Willis: Sometimes.

Rolf: Thanks very much for speaking with us today.

Willis: My pleasure.

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