

Health and wholeness: Granger Westberg

by [Ann Solari-Twadell](#) in the [March 17, 1999](#) issue

In the early 1960s Granger Westberg gave a sermon on grief at Rockefeller Chapel at the University of Chicago. The response from listeners indicated that it was something more than the usual sermon.

He spoke of the experience of loss and the stages of grief. He provided not a script for moving through the process of grief but an account of the feelings and changes that come with loss. The sermon eventually became a book, *Good Grief* (1962), which sold millions of copies and was translated into several languages.

A concern for the whole person--physical, psychological and spiritual--connects that well-known book with the program to which he devoted much of his life--the parish nurse program. When Westberg died on February 16, he had seen the parish nurse program expand from six churches to thousands around the world.

Westberg was trained as a Lutheran pastor. Soon after his first parish assignment he became chaplain at Augustana Hospital in Chicago, and in 1952 he became the first clergyman to hold a joint appointment at the University of Chicago in both the divinity and the medical schools. Later he was on the faculty at Baylor Medical School in Houston and at Wittenberg University's Hamma School of Theology.

While at Hamma, Westberg recognized the importance of making theology practical for seminarians. In teaching students engaged in congregational ministry, he realized that many of the issues that parishioners brought to their pastors were related to health. He helped develop health clinics for low-income congregations and then--in response to the challenge of his colleagues--for other sorts of congregations as well.

This led in the 1970s to the establishment of Wholistic Centers Inc. The first site was the Wholistic Health Center at Union Church in Hinsdale, Illinois. From this experience Westberg created the parish nurse program, developed with Lutheran

General Hospital in Park Ridge, Illinois. During these years, he authored several books emphasizing the relationship between religion and medicine.

Westberg began spreading the news about parish nursing at age 70. With the vigor and excitement of a person half that age, he traveled about the U.S., speaking about how a nurse, working with a pastor and a ministerial team, can revitalize a church's mission of health and healing. With tenacity and good humor, he conveyed a vision of the congregation as a "health place." His lectures on "The Three Acts of Illness" and "What Makes People Sick" underscored how much of people's "dis-ease" stems from a failure to recognize human beings in their wholeness--seeing the connections between the physical, emotional, spiritual and relational dimensions.

Westberg emphasized that decisions regarding lifestyle, relationships and community contribute to many of the patterns of "dis-ease." The role of preventive medicine, he argued, is to address these issues at their roots, not at some later stage of illness. Westberg also criticized the way so many health care dollars and resources are poured into technological responses to chronic illness and end-of-life care. Over and over he pushed medicine toward a more balanced use of resources.

The church has a powerful role to play in the transformation of health care, Westberg insisted. If faith communities do not step up to the plate on this issue, they are not fully living out their mission. Through his vision, Westberg changed the lives of thousands of people he never met and left a legacy that will continue to challenge those committed to the ministry of health and healing.