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Believers, skeptics debate whether faith can really heal

Sunday, March 28, 2004

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 STAFF WRITER *"The Record"*

Something was wrong with Lorice Greer's unborn baby.

She was devastated. But she knew what to do.

She prayed.

Oh please, God, don't let it be so.

Lorice prayed with her husband, Wayne. They linked hands. They squeezed shut their eyes.

Please, Lord, please.

Lorice and Wayne prayed with Wayne's mother, Lorlene. They prayed with their pastor. They prayed with the entire congregation of the Greater Faith of the Abundance Church in Paterson, everyone joining hands and calling on God to heal the unborn son of Lorice and Wayne Greer.

Can prayer heal? Ask Lorice Greer and she'll flip through her Bible till she arrives at John 14:14: "If ye shall ask anything in my name, that will I do."

At a time when medicine offers ever more awe-inspiring remedies, 30 percent of Americans say prayer was responsible for healing their illnesses, according to a Gallup Poll. Eight in 10 believe God works miracles. In one study, three-quarters of breast cancer patients reported asking God to help rid their bodies of disease.

Prayers for healing are said in the marble-lined chapel of Teaneck's Holy Name Hospital, where Mary McDonnell asks God to help her overcome colon cancer. "I don't expect any miracles," she says. "I just pray for the strength to get through it."

Prayers for healing are said at the bedsides of patients at St. Joseph's Wayne Hospital by chaplains such as Fevzi Kilic. "Soul medicine," he calls it.

Prayers for healing are said over the grave of a revered rabbi by Rivka Lewin, a Teaneck writer who says the holy man intercedes with God to help the sick.

And prayers for healing are said by an increasing number of doctors, like Louis Evan Teichholz, a cardiologist at Hack-

ensack University Medical Center. Spirituality is becoming a key tool in health care, he says.

Does prayer work? It's so effective that doctors who don't use it may be guilty of malpractice, says Dr. Larry Dossey, author of "Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine." In fact, medical schools across the nation now teach students to treat "whole" patients, their bodies and their souls.

Research has shown that prayer can relieve stress and stress-related ailments. The act of praying - of



BETH BALBIERZ / THE RECORD

▲ Lorlene Greer feeling the healing spirit of the Lord during a worship service at the Greater Faith of the Abundance Church in Paterson.

Obedience! shouts Minister Stokes. Obedience! Obedience!

Swaying in the crowd swarming around Reverend Lassiter is Lorice Greer. Her eyes are closed. Dozing in her arms is her son, Josiah. Doctors said Josiah would have Down syndrome. But he was born, 14 months ago, perfect.

A perfect baby boy.

Skeptics aplenty

Skeptics say talk of medical miracles is snake oil. In a case like that of baby Josiah Greer, they would say it's likely the doctor made an incorrect diagnosis. They point out the many people who are prayed over but die, and the many people who make spectacular recoveries without the benefit of prayer.

They cite the research of Carl Sagan, the late scientist and television host, who found that the frequency of unexpected cancer remissions more than explained the number of "miraculous" cures.

They quote George Bernard Shaw, the early 20th century philosopher and Nobel Prize-winning playwright. Upon seeing piles of crutches discarded by lame pilgrims healed at the Lourdes Cathedral, Shaw asked, "Where are all the wooden legs?" Why would God restore the ability to walk, but not restore lost limbs?

Since 1989, Posner, a physician who founded a group of scientists called the Tampa Bay Skeptics, has kept a \$1,000 check in his wallet to give to anyone who demonstrates a verifiable faith healing.

"What we'd like to see is, one time, just one time, if someone had a broken arm - a broken arm, you could see on a fluoroscope, an unmistakably broken bone - and then the arm is prayed over and, say, within an hour, take another fluoroscope and, without any medical intervention, the bone is healed. There would have to be only one instance of that for me to believe it," he says.

Some effects of faith, however, can be measured by scientists. Researchers have documented that the laying on of hands can help heal ailments caused by stress, according to Dr. Herbert Benson, president of the Harvard Mind/ Body Medical Institute and author of "The Relaxation Response."

Healing touch triggers the release of nitric oxide into the bloodstream, he says. Nitric oxide counteracts fight-or-flight hormones, which cause stress and can lead to depression, insomnia, menstrual pain, stroke, and other problems.

The immediate effects: decreased blood pressure, slower heart rate, and calmer breathing.

The question is whether the hand of God is actually intervening or whether patients get better because, as in the placebo effect, they simply believe that touch will cure them.

"It doesn't matter," Benson says. Belief, he says, makes the healing possible.

Scientific studies of prayer and healing often spark more questions than they answer. One example is the recent finding that churchgoers live longer.

"It doesn't tell you anything about faith," says Dr. Christina Puchalski, director of the George Washington University Institute for Spirituality & Health. "Some people go to church because someone nagged them into it. For them, there's no personal meaning in churchgoing."

Research has also found that pet owners who live with other people and participate in clubs recover faster from surgery. Social contact, not religion, may be doing the healing, Puchalski suggests.

"Nothing in the studies says religion is good for your health," she says. "There are too many variables to make that claim."