

NEW ORLEANS - Without a doubt, the most highly attended workshop at the North American Congress on the Holy Spirit and World Evangelization was led by a teddy-bear-like man in his mid-50s who says every Christian has the power to heal.

Southern California evangelist John Wimber, who has the looks of a rotund Kenny Rogers with the apparent healing powers of a Kathryn Kuhlman, has been bringing the crowds into New Orleans' Superdome for Power Evangelism '87 - daily three-hour workshops on healing. Thousands have sat at his feet to hear his matter-of-fact presentation of that supernatural gift.

In fact, Wimber uses several gifts of the Holy Spirit in his presentations. A key word in his vocabulary is "power," as well as "healing." He believes Christians have been given power from God to demonstrate the superiority of Christ over Satan through healings and exorcisms, also known as "signs and wonders."

Wimber's own road to becoming a healing evangelist and head of Vineyard Ministries, one of California's baby boomer churches, has been a rocky one, but these days, he has become known as one of the few healing evangelists who can deliver. "I don't have any secret," he told a crowd Friday. "What I've been doing has been manifest for 2,000 years."

"I'm no superstar," he said. "I'm not Kathryn Kuhlman or Oral Roberts. I don't live in a supernatural aura. Most of what I say at times is inane and stupid." Wimber's self-effacing manner along with a cool, humorous and somewhat fatherly style put at ease any onlookers who were suspicious of healing.

He explained the methods by which he heals, which include a spiritual gift called a "word of knowledge," which is like an inner hint or intuition from God of something one ordinarily would have no knowledge of.

Demonstrating how such a word of knowledge works, Wimber said there was a woman in the audience who had damaged kneecaps. A woman in green shyly stepped to the aisle; Wimber motioned for two of his team members to pray with her. He mentioned other ailments he said God had informed him of: a woman with a growth on her abdomen, a breast ailment, a larynx problem. A person with that problem would raise his or her hand and a healing team would go to that person.

These teams would first interview the sick person, decide what kind of prayer he or she needed and then place their hands on that person. Often, the recipients of prayers would drop to the floor in a brief swoon known as being "slain in the Spirit." Wimber also invited audience members who had "words of knowledge" to come to the microphone and express them. Various people came up with a range of more ailments they felt were present in the room: multiple sclerosis, tumors and hernias. Some of the people called out complex medical descriptions and usually got a hand waved in response.

All this pleased Wimber immensely as he saw the responses to his you-too-can-heal-people approach.

"C'mon now!" he exhorted the crowd. "You've been ordained (to heal). There's no way I could pray for this many people, so you do it."

Excerpt from the Houston Chronicle. July 26, 1987 by Julia Duin.