

## MINISTRY TO THE SICK

The Church's ministry to the sick is a continuation of Christ's own ministry; particularly in the practice of visiting and attending to the sick, widows and orphans, and those truly in need. This in fulfillment of Christ's own commandment "I was sick and you visited me" (Mt 25:36,45); and the apostolic ministry of his disciples, who initiated anointing with oil (Mk. 6:13). That the tradition was followed in the early church is evidenced by James 5:14, where the practice of visiting the sick, and anointing them with oil, is prescribed.<sup>1</sup>

Early patristic witnesses also spoke about the care and cure of the sick. Polycarp said that elders should 'take in the abandoned and visit all the sick, without forgetting widows and orphans'. Hippolytus of Rome, referring to deacons, remarked that they should 'notify the bishop of those who are sick, so that he may visit them. For it is most comforting to the sick to know that the high priest is mindful of them.' St. Athanasius recalls it is very sad for the sick not to be visited by anyone since 'they consider this calamity more serious than their illness itself.' St. Augustine – followed the example of the Apostle James (Jas 1.27) in visiting orphans and widows in their sorrow and in going to pray for the sick and lay his hands on them.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus' preferred gesture of healing was the laying on of hands (Lk 4.40, Mk. 1.40-41, Mk. 8.22-26, Jn. 9.6-7, Mk. 7.32-36).<sup>3</sup> When he anointed, he did so with spittle; to heal a blind man (Jn 9:6), and a deaf man with speech problems (Mk 7:33).<sup>4</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, Clement of

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<sup>1</sup> Dionisio Borobio, An Enquiry into Healing Anointing in the Early Church, in Mary Collins and David N. Power, eds., *The Pastoral Care of the Sick*, (London: SCM Press, 1991), 44.

<sup>2</sup> Borobio, 45.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>4</sup> Carolyn Headley, The Laying on of Hands and Anointing: In Ministry for Wholeness and Healing, (Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd., 2002), 9.

Alexandra and Ireneaus all refer to the laying on of hands in ministry to the sick, with expectation of healing as a result. By the 3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E. there was a variety of practice, from blessing followed by signing the affected part of the body with a cross, to full laying on of hands with anointing, a task assigned to the bishop in the Canons of Hippolytus.<sup>5</sup>

Ministry to the deathly ill and the dying came to consist primarily of food for the journey in the form of the eucharist, in this usage known as *viaticum*. Indeed, the first ecumenical council of Nicea (325 CE) adopted Canon 13, which stipulated that a dying Christian 'is not to be deprived of the last and necessary provision for the journey, *viaticum*.'<sup>6</sup>

Over time, healing became a miracle associated with sainthood, rather than common practice of whole church. From the 9<sup>th</sup> century onward, there was a withdrawal from church's ministry to the sick; coupled with a developing emphasis on anointing plus laying on of hands for death rather than healing. By the middle ages, the practice had become known as extreme unction, and was conflated with rites of penance and *viaticum*.<sup>7</sup>

Since the Reformers only accepted the sacraments of Baptism and the Communion, they automatically denied the sacramental value of the laying on of hands or anointing.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Bucer termed the rite of healing a distorted imitation of an apostolic act, and called for its abolition. Calvin called it a mere hypocritical stage play. While Luther supported it in letter to a pastor, it was not reflected in Lutheran services for the sick.<sup>9</sup>

In England, an attempt was made to reintroduce anointing with prayers in 1537, but the Church in England was reluctant to use it. The 1549 *Prayer Book* provided for anointing of sick; but the 1552 *Prayer*

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<sup>5</sup> Carolyn Headley, The Laying on of Hands and Anointing: In Ministry for Wholeness and Healing, (Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd., 2002), 12

<sup>6</sup> Charles W. Gusmer, And You Visited Me: Sacramental Ministry to the Sick and Dying, (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1984), 108.

<sup>7</sup> Headley, 12

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

*Book* reduced ministry to the sick to visitation focusing on confession of sin. The 1662 *Prayer Book* repeated the same emphasis. It took until 1718 for the Non-jurors to reintroduce a service for visitation of the sick including unction for recovery.<sup>10</sup> While the Tractarians favoured the restoration of unction, it was not until the 1930's that the Church of England officially approved services for anointing and laying on of hands.<sup>11</sup>

In Canada there was no provision for either anointing or laying on of hands in the 1918 *Common Prayer*. These rites were introduced in the 1959 revision.

In the Roman Catholic world, the liturgical reforms of Vatican II not only recovered anointing as a sacrament for the sick, but viaticum as sacrament for the dying.<sup>12</sup> The liturgical forms introduced by the Romans were reflected in the Church of England's 1983 *Ministry to the Sick*, a supplement to the 1980 *Alternative Service Book*<sup>13</sup>; and the Canadian *Book of Alternative Services*, issued in 1985. However, the concept of *viaticum* is one that the Anglican Church has not yet accepted.

The recovery of the Church's healing ministry, reflected above, occurred at the same time as alternative therapies were becoming fashionable in medicine.<sup>14</sup> The church now recognizes itself as a healing community in which Christ's healing work on earth is practised and extended.<sup>15</sup> Its resources for the task currently include: Visitation of the Sick at home or in hospital; the Eucharist; the Rite of Laying on of Hands and Anointing; Intercessory prayer; and the Ministry of Reconciliation, including confession and counselling. Moreover, provision has been made for the rites of Laying on of Hands and Anointing to be administered in

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<sup>10</sup> Headley, 13.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>12</sup> Gusmer, 112.

<sup>13</sup> Headley, 14.

<sup>14</sup> Frank Wright, *The Pastoral Nature of Healing*, (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1985), 31.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 49.

the context of a regular worship service – either the Eucharist or a Prayer Service. Thereby the healing ministry of the Church is made available to the entire congregation, holistically, for spiritual as well as physical healing. Where this ministry is offered it is not uncommon for entire congregations to come forward to receive it. The writer has been part of just such a congregation. At one Eucharist a month half of the altar rail was reserved for healing ministry, half for the Eucharist. The ministry started slowly at first, but within one year everyone was regularly receiving healing as well as the Eucharist; attesting to the spiritual malaise and brokenness that many recognize in their lives, but could not verbalize in other ways.

In some situations, there has been a formal effort to integrate healing ministry with physical medicine. The Anglican home at Burrswood, in Kent, is such a healing centre. There is close cooperation between medicine and religion – the staff includes both doctors and priests. Patients receive orthodox medical treatment, and share in life of therapeutic community. There is a healing service every Thursday morning; incorporating the laying on of hands. The experience there is that the complementarity of scientific and medical competence with hidden and spiritual factors makes for healing and wholeness.<sup>16</sup> The effectiveness of this approach is, however, not universally accepted. A similar experiment in Toronto, The Miriam Dobeil Centre, had to close due to lack of community support and funding.

The contemporary approach to “faith healing” recognizes that putting all the emphasis on the faith of person to be healed can imply a lack of faith if healing does not occur. Such an approach would leave a person in a worse place than they already were, adding feelings of inadequacy and guilt to an already miserable situation. Instead, there is recognition that healing is God’s work, and faith is only the ‘motor’ that

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<sup>16</sup> Wright, 38-39.

makes it possible for us to receive the healing.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, it is now understood that healing may be spiritual rather than physical, although neither possibility is excluded. The healing may come in acceptance of a new reality; a coming to terms with ourselves, with others, and with God, and finding peace. It may also come through death. The theologian Jürgen Moltmann has said that one sign of true health is having ‘the strength to die’.<sup>18</sup> As Christians, after all, we believe in eternal life in the Kingdom of God. In that light, death is a transition to a better place where there is no more pain and suffering, but eternal bliss in the company of our Master.

To avoid raising unreasonable expectation, the Church’s healing ministry must differentiate between God’s will to cure and God’s will to heal.<sup>19</sup> As Frank Wright put it, in explaining why there can be a different result in similar cases, “His will is for both of us to be healed: in my case, perhaps, without physical cure; in his case, through a cure which by itself is insufficient unless it leads on to that wholeness which is everyone’s ultimate goal.”<sup>20</sup> With appropriate support, when a cure does not happen we may be able to see that something IS being wrought to our eternal glory – there may be graces of patience and perseverance to be grown into, courage to be won, and humility and inter-dependent-ness to be learned through our circumscribed and limited life. Acceptance will drive out self-pity. Looking for the positive in the disability will help us to find unexpected sources of blessing.<sup>21</sup> In order to realize our destiny and be in conformity with God’s will it may be we shall not be cured, but we may be healed.

Ministry to the sick has been the most meaningful part of my short experience of ministry. During my internship, my supervisor underwent a

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<sup>17</sup> Wright, 32.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 46.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

medical procedure that kept him at home, convalescing, for some three and a half weeks. As a result I was permitted to do nursing home services, and ministry to the sick in hospital and at home; including administering communion from the Reserved Sacrament. During my CPE placement, I was assigned as chaplain to the Neuro-Intensive Care Unit. Unlike my Catholic colleagues who took turns being the Eucharistic Minister for Catholic patients; I did not have permission to administer the Reserved Sacrament, since I was not operating in my seminary or home diocese. Bereft of ministry tools, I discovered that I could do a laying-on-of-hands; and made that a part of my ministry practice when something more than prayer was appropriate.

My experience of the use of both communion and the laying on of hands in ministry to the sick is nothing but positive. Healings did occur. As has been noted above, on some occasions the healing was of a spiritual nature – a reconciliation, acceptance and peace. That in itself was a gift to one family whose patriarch was given nine months to live; but was able to go home and be with his family. They were given the gift of time to say all of the things they needed to say, to enjoy each other in a more intense way than they had ever experienced, and to say goodbye. It did not end in a hospital room, attached to machines and bottles and tubes. Having had a similar experience with my own father, I was enabled to help this family see God's grace in what appeared to be disaster.

In another instance, I attended at an extubation of a woman with Chronic Pulmonary Obstruction Disease. On a previous occasion I had done the laying on of hands with members of her family, and prayed for her restoration to them, if that should be God's will. On this occasion, I was asked to pray with them in the expectation of her passing. She was not expected to live out the day. She went home one week later. I cannot claim to have been any more than the conduit for God's healing grace. But I can attest to the fact that she was healed.

As a result of my experiences, a healing ministry would be a significant part of any ministry that I do in the future.

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