

The Christian Healing Ministry

Introduction – The Bible and Healing

The Church's involvement in the ministry of healing has a theological framework. It springs from what we believe about God and His will and purposes for humankind. Christians believe that God's will for His human creation is wholeness in body, mind and spirit. It follows that healing, however generated, is a positive experience that frees us from any abnormality that interferes with wholeness. One marvels at the human organism's self-healing properties that, at times, need some outside help. Whilst we have to admit the reality of human pain and suffering in this world, it is difficult to believe that they can be there at the instigation of the One who saw His creation to be good.¹

Healing was central to the ministry of Jesus when He was on earth. A large percentage of His miracles were miracles of healing. Furthermore He commissioned His disciples to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to heal.²

It seems clear that Jesus' commission to heal was not just for His immediate followers but for succeeding generations of Christians. The apostle Paul writes of 'Gifts of Healings' being available to Christians.³ James says that those who are sick should call for the elders of the church to pray over them for healing.⁴

Healing and the Church

During the first three centuries of the Christian era physical healings by miraculous means were not uncommon. They were acknowledged by contemporary church leaders and were seen as evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church. The Church was young; personal and corporate faith was strong, stimulated by the ever present threat of persecution and martyrdom. When, towards the end of that period, Christian belief and practice became established and respectable, faith weakened and expectation of divine intervention in healing diminished. Emerging medical science was seen by many to be God's new way of healing and the Church became involved in this. However, reports of miraculous healings continued where individual and corporate faith was strong, where there was an expectation that God could and did heal miraculously and where there was a conviction that Christ's call to His followers to heal the sick was still in force.

Throughout much of the twentieth century there has been a resurgence of interest in the spiritual dimension of healing. Now many congregations in all denominations exercise a healing ministry. The Psychological and Spiritual Healing Committee of the Methodist Church was established in 1938 and evolved into the Ministry of Healing Committee in 1977. An inter-church group, The Churches' Council for

¹ Genesis 1:31

² Luke 9:2

³ 1 Corinthians 12:28

⁴ James 5:14

Health and Healing in Ireland is an umbrella organisation that provides encouragement, support and guidance. Some members of the Ministry of Healing committee represent the Methodist Church on the council.

The Healing Ministry and Medical Knowledge Today

The majority of Christians, who are rediscovering this spiritual dimension of healing, see it as complementary to rather than an alternative to the work of the medical professionals. We encourage those with health concerns to seek the guidance of medical professionals. At times there seems to have been an uneasy relationship between the church and the emerging scientific developments in medicine though the Church has had a major input into the establishing of hospitals and other caring institutions.

We acknowledge that all healing is of God; a conviction we share with many in the medical world. What we had been discovering as the twentieth century progressed was that Christians and Christian communities have a spiritual resource, largely unused for centuries, with which to combat disease and promote wholeness of body and mind as well as of spirit. We are coming to the realisation that Christ's call to His followers to preach, teach and heal has never been withdrawn. Therefore, we can make a contribution, adding it where appropriate to the work of the medical practitioners in the healing of diseases and the pursuit of the wholeness that, we believe, God wills for humankind.

Involvement in the ministry of healing requires that we be aware of, and avoid two extremes. First, whilst we acknowledge that most illnesses are cured by medical intervention we need to avoid saying, or believing, that only such intervention can bring about healing. To adopt this stance is to place limits on God and there is much credible evidence to suggest that people have been cured miraculously. Secondly, we must avoid the sensational practices and claims of some of those claiming to be Christian healers.

The Basis for a Healing Ministry Today

We have to acknowledge that there are many unanswered questions in respect of illness and recovery or the lack of it. Perhaps the main reservation people have about embarking on a healing ministry is the fear of disappointment for those to whom they may minister. What if people come expecting to be cured of illness and that does not happen? The Church's ministry of healing is not exercised simply to cure an ailment or postpone aging but to bring wholeness to a person – in her/his relationship with God, with her/his neighbours and within herself/himself. Many people find it helpful to make a distinction between healing and curing. Many, who have experienced prayer for healing, say that whilst the cure they had hoped for did not materialise God did heal them by blessing them with composure, peace and resilience in the face of the continuing illness.

A theology of suffering may help us to reflect on the ministry brought to human society by those who, by God's grace, bear illness with dignity. The fruit of the Spirit

does not grow in a vacuum but against the testing winds of difficulty. Those who minister to the suffering may find that the fruit grows in them too.

It is important to stress the fact that it is Christ who is the healer. The healing ministry is best exercised by a society/congregation in Christ's name. The prayers of the faithful create the environment in which healing can occur. The individuals who minister are instruments in the hands of Christ. They are not professionals though they must have some training and should be commissioned by their local church. The Charismatic movement has helped Christians to rediscover the fact that God bestows gifts, including gifts of healings, on members of His Church. Those so gifted, will exercise their gifts with wisdom, love and humility.

Practical Suggestions about this Ministry in the Local Church

Ideally the healing ministry is best offered within the context of the normal worship and pastoral life of each congregation. That may be within Services of Worship on Sunday, by prayer teams before and/or after services, in weeknight meetings or in hospitals, nursing homes or private homes. There remains a useful place for special services of healing. How the ministry is exercised in a local setting must be a matter for the individual circuit/society and church council.

If the ministry is being offered during public worship the person leading the service must ensure that clear information and directions are given in order to avoid discomfort or embarrassment either to those seeking personal ministry or the congregation generally.

In the public worship setting the ministry of healing may be exercised in a number of ways not necessarily mutually exclusive:

- Names may be placed in a prayer box or book and thus transmitted to the intercessor/ministry team prior to the prayer time. Prayer is then offered seeking God's blessing and healing on those whose names have been submitted.
- If persons are to be prayed for by name this should usually only be done at the persons' request or with their permission.
- Where members of the congregation are to be asked to mention the first name of persons for whom prayer is requested, the minister or leader should make it clear that they should only do so if the persons concerned have agreed to be named.
- An opportunity may be given for individuals to seek personal or proxy ministry either at the communion rail or at a designated prayer station in the church building. In this circumstance those seeking ministry should be encouraged, if they so wish, to speak about the prayer need to the ministry team. If prayer stations are used it is important that they be visible to others in the church.

- Care should be taken to ensure that counselling does not develop during such periods of ministry.
- The ministry may be offered through the laying on of hands on either the head or the shoulder. Anointing with oil on the forehead may also be used. Both have scriptural warrant as vehicles for the transmission of grace. However, personal ministry need not necessarily involve touch and persons should be asked if they feel comfortable with the action of having hands laid upon them.

Where the ministry is offered in hospital or nursing home it is important that prior arrangements are made with those in charge and sensitivity exercised in respect of other patients or residents who may be sharing the ward or room. It is highly desirable that at least two persons exercise the ministry and that they have the prayer support of the society/congregation to which they belong.

Wherever the ministry is exercised it is of the utmost importance that appropriate safeguards are in place to ensure the welfare of both intercessors and those seeking ministry. Any information shared in the ministry time should be regarded as confidential except in cases that may involve the abuse of children or vulnerable adults where disclosure is a legal requirement.

There are distinct advantages in having two persons, one male and one female, ministering to each person seeking help.

The prayer teams should meet for prayer before and after each ministry session.

Some Resources

In respect of how a service for healing is ordered there should not be any hard and fast rules. However, the Ministry of Healing committee commends three orders of service: (i) 'An Order of Service for Healing and Wholeness' (2011). (ii) 'An Order of Service for Healing and Wholeness' (included in *Methodist Worship* [1999]). (iii) 'Healing the Hurts' (2005).

Finally, if, having read this, you would like to organise a healing service but feel a bit nervous about it please contact our committee. We will help in any way we can.

We close with the special declaration of Jesus: *I have come that you may have life, and have it to the full.*

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