

Healing 1: What is Healing?

Scepticism about the place of healing in the Church.

The Methodist Church recognises the need to offer services of healing, evidenced by the liturgy offered in our worship book. I first began offering healing services in 2003 and have experimented with a range of styles including services designed by the Iona Community and hybrids which are more sensitive to different contexts. Whilst the use of formal liturgies endorses the provision of healing services, some congregations may prefer an approach that is less prescribed. Whether we offer healing as a service in full or within a prayer meeting is irrelevant.

Despite this affirmation of the healing ministry, some people initially struggle with the idea. In this respect it may be helpful to begin by addressing the common concerns. In my view, scepticism about the place of healing in the Church is underpinned by a number of factors:

Firstly, whilst the introduction to the healing service in the worship book stresses its centrality to the gospel and worship in the early Church, there is no developed theology of healing.

Secondly, there is the concern that if we offer people prayer for physical healing and they do not receive it, how will we justify ourselves?

Thirdly, the dramatic accounts of both healing and exorcism in the scriptures (exorcism can be taken as a form of spiritual healing) are subjects on which the Church may not have had adequate teaching. One hopes that every congregation is open to the ministry of the Holy Spirit even though we may show it in different ways. Even if we are open to the ministry of the Holy Spirit, we may have not considered, at depth, the concept of spiritual possession or oppression. This has not been helped by a tendency to focus on more rational pathways of healing, such as modern medicine, jettisoning any other way of understanding loss of health in its broadest sense.

Fourthly, the practice of offering healing may involve a change in ethos about how we conduct our services and how we are led by the Holy Spirit. On the one hand there will be those who rightly stress the prayerful preparation and planning required for worship. On the other there are those who recognise that our plans may have to change, dependent on the pastoral and spiritual needs of those before us. It may be that we sense the presence of God

This can be unsettling to those who struggle with change and value the predictability of our services. Whilst worship requires prayerful preparation, we may suddenly find ourselves led to spend more time in prayer, to bring the prayers of healing forward or to reduce the number of hymns mindful of the immediate pastoral need that is before us.

Finally, we wrestle against the negative stereotypes of healing which link it to a particular form of evangelism (such as healing tele-evangelists of the USA) and the focus of healing as a gift by God given to one person. This runs counter to a concept of healing whereby the community of the Church is a place where healing happens. This is one area which I am keen to make progress. As a minister people feel perhaps more secure about my praying for their healing. However, we need to build congregations where the laying on of hands and prayers for healing can be shared

by more people. At the same time, sound teaching and a clear pastoral discipline must be in place.

A broader understanding of healing

When we speak of healing we must not think only in terms of miraculous physical healing. The gospels show how healing takes place in body, mind and spirit. Whilst the scriptures give clear warrant to anoint the sick and pray for them by the laying on of hands (James 5:14-15), this gives the impression of a search for miraculous healing. Whilst this is one aspect of the healing ministry, it seems reasonable to suggest that prayers for healing were carried out in tandem with medical care offered by experts such as Luke, who was a doctor. Hence, we must balance the search for a miracle alongside a broader understanding of healing.

I would argue that the entire gospel is healing. Jesus comes as the Messiah to bring restoration to a broken people. This involves an encounter with the living God, an overwhelming sense of his love, release from guilt through God's forgiveness, deliverance from evil, the promise of spiritual renewal, physical healing, transformation of the mind and shalom (community peace).

Cautious approach

Sadly, we are often wary of the pastoral and spiritual fragility of those who are unwell. Instead of affirming the possibility of literal healing (however remote our experiences may suggest that this might be), we exercise caution. We focus more on their spiritual well-being and rarely pray for physical healing. However, the centrality of miraculous healing in the gospels, coupled with our unwillingness to pray, signals that we either lack the confidence that God will heal or that we do not believe that God heals miraculously today. The silence of the Church at a local level on these issues is potentially damaging because people who are struggling with sickness, grief or any other kind of trouble will want to know that God can make a difference. What purpose is there in worshipping a God who has no earthly use? Is it, as Karl Marx suggests, that religious belief is 'pie in the sky when you die?'

Acknowledging that there are no easy answers

In response, we must show that we are at least aware the questions that they might have – and live in the real world. We must also explain, with reference to our own experience, that we live with these paradoxes of faith. Why does a loving God allow suffering? Why should God heal us and do nothing to alleviate the pain of a starving child in the developing world? There are no easy answers. The simple truth is that we are commanded to pray for healing. Although people may not find the physical healing that they desire, they may find healing at another level. I am often amazed by those who have battled terminal illness without success who know the peace and presence of God, who have little concern for their own well-being and greatest concern for those who they will leave behind. You may feel that this evidence supports the argument for a focus on inner healing rather than miraculous healing. Conversely, I consider that the difference is the starting point.

Being obedient to the call to pray

We are too quick to give up on God. We eliminate from the pastoral conversation any notion that God could heal miraculously. We talk of journeying with God and having the spiritual strength to face the experiences that await us. Whilst this is pastorally sensitive it is theologically flawed - and fails to mirror the determination of those struggling with illness to recover. Whilst they embrace harsh medical treatment, healthy eating and a radical change of lifestyle we adopt an approach that

is laissez-fair, accepting anything that comes our way. Our failings are not so much about a lack of faith. They are about a lack of obedience. Whilst a time may come when it is pastorally appropriate to shift away from prayers that fight an illness towards prayers that help the person prepare for their onward journey, this is needs to be their decision and not ours. Our focus from the initial diagnosis of a serious illness should be to pray for healing.

Answers from people who journey with suffering

One of the most powerful places of healing at which I have been present is at the Catholic Shrine of Lourdes. At the time Ro and I were supervising school children who were assisting British Pilgrims. These people had travelled to Lourdes in search of healing. I left with two strong impressions. The first was that God could be at work among people who shared a very different theology from my own, but who shared the common belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing healing. The second, was that I travelled to Lourdes concerned about what I would say to those people who were ill, who yearned for healing. When I arrived I met with people who visited Lourdes annually. Even though they had not received a physical healing they knew far more about healing than I ever could. Significantly it was the experience of pilgrimage and the closeness of God that led them to return. It may be that we concern ourselves too much with what we need to say to those who long for healing and yet have not received it. We will find that God is already in this space.

Healing within community: Creating Sacred Space

Given the warrant for leaders within Churches to pray that the sick will be healed, questions about whether there is a need for such people to have a specific 'gift of healing' seems superfluous. I would suggest, given the theology of healing that I have outlined, that the Church should be a place of healing. Rather than a focus on one person with the gift, we need to encourage a culture of prayer and a mutual responsibility to lay hands on the sick and pray that they will be healed.

In one sense we should not need to construct healing services, since the needs of those who are not well, those who care for them or those who simply feel helpless should already be met. Even so, given our preaching based tradition and the diversity of need (especially within all-age worship) there may be a need to create further space laid aside specifically for prayer and healing. This was commonplace in early Methodism. Some circuits such as our own had a separate plan of prayer meetings running alongside preaching services. Such services may mean allowing more time for people to respond and share their concerns, although prayer for healing is not the same as a pastoral conversation.

It is worth mentioning briefly the role of Holy Communion within the Church, and its possible inclusion within healing services. I have offered prayer for healing as part of communion or on its own. Whilst some may have felt this to be distracting, I do believe that it helps balance our understanding of healing by placing it in the context of discipleship. None of the disciples or apostles had an easy life. All suffered directly as a result of their faith, some being martyred. When we share in communion we remember two things. Firstly, we carry the cross and face the trials of this world. Secondly, we remember the promise of peace and our commitment to care for each other.