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*With God's grace, the mission of our ministries  
is to enable people to know Jesus Christ,  
to live and share the good news,  
to grow in faith and to serve God's world.*

## A Pastoral letter to the Clergy of the Diocese of Ottawa No. 2

From: The Rt. Rev. John H Chapman, Diocesan Bishop  
Date: Holy Cross 2010

Dear Sisters and Brothers in ordained ministry

### **Re: Ministry to the Sick**

As you know, teaching and practice regarding the ministry to the sick has taken a variety of forms this last decade. What follows is, what I believe to be, a sound theological statement consistent with Anglican teaching and practice.

I am asking you to be directed by this teaching and liturgical guidelines as you exercise this critical ministry.

I am grateful to the Doctrine and Worship Panel for their assistance in producing this document.

### **1. Theological Foundations**

In caring for the sick, the Church responds to a basic human need. The appearance of sickness, whether sudden or in stages, is always some sort of crisis. The body's imperfect condition or the mind's agonies call for attention and set us on a path towards restoration. We share the experience of illness and the desire to aid the sick with all humankind. What is more, the Church believes that it acts in the grace of God for the health and salvation of its members. Such ministry is grounded on Jesus' own compassion and care for the sick. The early witness of the Letter of James has shaped the growth and direction of the Church's ministry: the sick call upon the elders (*presbyteroi*) of the community to come pray over them and to anoint them with oil in the name of Jesus Christ. James speaks of this ministry as having three effects: the prayer of faith will save (*sōōsei*) the sick, the Lord will raise them up (*egerei*), and their sins will be forgiven. The relation between the physical and spiritual dimensions of sickness is underscored in this text by the first two verbs. The prayer of faith will save/heal -- the word has both meanings in Greek. The "raising up" refers both to rising from the illness, literally getting out of bed, but is also the verb used to describe God's raising Jesus from death (cf. Acts 3:15; 26:8; 2 Cor. 1:9).

In subsequent centuries, much attention has been given to the oil. In the Letter of James, the oil is likely simply part of the ancient world's common pharmacopoeia. What is significant is the presence of the senior, leading members of the community by whose presence the alienation that sickness brings is overcome. These leaders offer a ministry that is the extension of the Church's basic Lord's Day worship: the proclamation of the Word and the thanksgiving over bread and wine.

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The laying on of hands and the use of oil, traditionally known as "unction," is described by *The Book of Alternative Services* as "the moment when the prayer of the Church for the healing power of God is made specific and particular in relation to this sick person" (p. 552). The prayer following the anointing asks that God grant the sick person "the inward anointing of the Holy Spirit," forgiveness of sins, release from suffering and restoration to wholeness and strength. In this context, the action with the oil may be considered anamnetic, that is, making the remembrance of, declaring and renewing the baptismal character of the sick person who was marked as Christ's own forever.

Many Christians, including great saints, have found illness to be an occasion for deeper prayer, an opportunity to join their own suffering to that of Christ. For others, sickness makes prayer especially difficult. In such a situation, the presence of the Church to the sick person can be an important support in prayer. Regular communal celebrations of ministry to the sick which emphasize the Paschal Mystery can do much to overcome sickness as a merely private experience. The Church's ministry to the sick assumes a prophetic dimension when it challenges stigmatization and exclusion, as, for example with persons living with HIV/AIDS.

Any experience of illness is a reminder that meaning is an achievement. The Church's ministry to the sick is neither a promise of a cure nor a hollow gesture. Its sacramental care encompasses the whole person as the punning verbs of James' letter attest. Its ministry celebrates and welcomes the array of methods human ingenuity and skill have found to combat illness. The ancient sage of Israel urges the wise to "give the physician his place, for the Lord created him; do not let him leave you, for you need him" (Sirach 38:12). Thus, the Church welcomes the skill, insight and care of the medical profession. Indeed, it welcomes all that contributes to health and healing at both the individual and the public level.

A preoccupation with physical healing can oversimplify God's will to the point that God is always set on the side of good health. This is more an expression of bourgeois beatitude than of biblical faith. Scripture attests as well to the reality of lament. This form of prayer brings before God the starkest experiences of evil and unresolved suffering. Jesus' cry of desolation on the cross points to the utter otherness of God's will, revealed in the agony and bloody sweat, the cross and passion, the precious death and burial, as much as in the resurrection and ascension.

## **2. Modes of Healing**

In addition to sacramental ministry to the sick and collaboration with modern medicine, parish communities act as healing communities in other ways, for example, parish nursing or counselling and psychotherapy by clergy and laity with specialized training. People visit the housebound or hospitalized either with formal training or simply out of spontaneous compassion. Still others address prophetically social structures and practices that degrade the health of human persons and the planet as a whole. Countless others, alone, in small groups, or at the Sunday liturgy, provide support, prayer, and community in humble, practical and effective ways. Prayer blankets, quilts, crosses and other crafted goods are tangible signs of the community's concern.

Anglican care for the sick has been enriched in the last several generations by the work of the Order of St. Luke. The Anglican Fellowship of Prayer assists and encourages the prayer life of the faithful. In the Diocese of Ottawa, the work of the Ottawa Pastoral Care Committee provides important formation and supervision for hospital visitors.

Contemporary society also knows an array of alternative or complementary health practices: naturopathy, homeopathy, ayurveda, various sorts of massage therapy, healing touch and so forth. Christians, like anyone else, need to take due caution around untested therapies. The sick can also be misled or abused by charlatans and opportunists. Christians will affirm positive good that comes from any source, while opposing as appropriate any form of medical practice that assaults, corrupts and destroys the creatures of God. What many such therapies offer, however, is a sense that the whole

person is being addressed, sometimes in ways that modern medicine can overlook. It is here that the message of the gospel can be heard as genuinely good news: whatever the outcome of an illness, it is always an occasion for repentance and renewal, always an occasion to rejoice that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:39).

The Church has also known occasions of healing which seem utterly out of proportion to the therapeutic measures used or any reasonable hope of their success. These extraordinary, charismatic healings are not ordered through the Church's liturgical tradition. Care must be taken not to confuse rite and charism. Both are instruments of God and are means of showing the glory of God. The liturgical tradition seeks to provide a Christian form to our living and dying, providing a means of giving the pattern of Christ to the wounds we sustain. The sacraments reveal God but do not contain God. Of the charism of healing, little can be said systematically as it is not a systematic phenomenon. For most of us, most of the time, it appears to be God's will that we live with ambiguity in such a way that we allow ourselves to trust God and keep all options open to the power of God's love.

### **3. Elements of the Rites**

The Church's rites of ministry to the sick are offered to any who feel the need of specific healing of body, mind and spirit. This ministry is especially appropriate at the discovery of illness, a turning point in an illness, a particular procedure, or at a time of great distress. The oil used for the ministry to the sick is traditionally pure olive oil, blessed by a priest or bishop. Unlike the chrism used for baptism, no fragrance is added to the oil (some fragrances can be allergens or aggravate an illness). A privileged way of blessing the oil is found in the rite for the same in *The Book of Alternative Services* (p. 617). The precursors to this rite have traditionally been celebrated on Maundy Thursday, but a more suitable time may be any major gathering of a diocese, presided by the bishop, such as a Synod where a wide representation of the whole Church is present. Such celebration underscores the sacramental and ecclesial character of the anointing of the sick. Mindful of this tradition, in the Diocese of Ottawa the Bishop will bless oils for Diocesan use at the annual Synod Eucharist.

### **4. The Order of Service**

Ministry with the sick or dying may include some or all of the following actions by the minister and people. The structure of the rite follows that of the Sunday Eucharist. When prayer for healing precedes the liturgy of the table, it is more evident that participation in communion is the climax of the service.

**Gathering** This may be a greeting such as "The Grace," the Easter greeting, or other appropriate greeting.

**Proclamation of the Word** One or more passages of scripture may be read. The minister may comment briefly on the reading. A public service of healing ordinarily includes a homily or other form of response.

**Prayer for the Church and the World**, and especially for God's healing grace. Prayer may be offered for individual(s) in need of healing and for the needs of the Church and the world. Laying on of hands [and anointing] is part of the Church's intercession. The subsequent administration of communion is then focussed on participation in the sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood, the primary sacrament of healing. A confession of sin and absolution may be included prior to the laying on of hands. If communion is not included, the Lord's Prayer follows the laying on of hands.

### **The Peace**

**The Communion** A public service of healing may include celebration of the Eucharist, beginning with the preparation of the gifts. Extended communion is the taking of the consecrated elements by a lay

eucharistic minister or ordained minister to those who unable to participate in the Church's eucharistic assembly by reason of illness or infirmity. For those in nursing homes or chronic care hospitals or in other long confinements, a celebration of the Eucharist in the facility can be a source of particular joy.

### **5. *The Ministers of the Rites***

Ordinarily, a priest or bishop presides at a public service of healing. The ministry may be extended to others who demonstrate gifts of empathy, active listening, prayerfulness and patience and have received a theological and liturgical formation for this purpose. The ministry is under the direction of the incumbent of the parish or other member of the clergy in charge of the local congregation. If there is a public celebration of healing, a deacon or lay person may lead a service that concludes with the Peace and a dismissal. Oil for anointing must be blessed by the bishop, [or a priest, using the rite of the Book of Common Prayer (p. 585)].

Lay visitors to the sick who administer holy communion from the reserved sacrament should also take a share in serving as lay eucharistic ministers at Sunday liturgies.

Formation for ministers to the sick should include: biblical witnesses to sickness and healing; theology of intercession, the human person, suffering and death; liturgy and sacraments; pastoral skills of empathetic listening; ethical standards including confidentiality.

Yours in Christ,

*+ John Offawa*