

Planning a Healing Service: Worship and Ritual Guidelines

“Be strong and let your heart take courage”

-Psalm 27

From somewhere a calm musical note arrives.

*You balance it on your tongue, a single ripe grape,
till your whole body glistens. In the space between breaths
you apply it to any wound and the wound heals.*

-Naomi Shihab Nye, Words Under the Words

Worship and ritual are powerful ways for congregations to bless one another and bring healing to people facing cancer and other serious illness. There are many possible goals and structures for healing services but in its essence, ritual offers all who enter an invitation to pause at the sacred threshold of the holy. We suggest you take some time with your co-planners to reflect on the occasion, the participants, and the hopes, before going into the specifics. Questions to ask this moment may include:

- 1) *What kind of ritual is this?* A traditional healing ritual might be anointing with oil or laying on of hands. But there are other options that might also bring healing, for example, a cleansing ritual (hand washing, foot washing); Communion/Eucharist/Lord’s Supper; a prayer service; a housing blessing; or a rite of transition or loss, marking passage from one phase of a journey to another.¹
- 2) *When will we hold the healing service?* Are we incorporating this ritual into a regular Sunday morning service? If so, how will the rest of the service be adapted to reflect this healing piece? Are we envisioning a monthly/weekly time, a seasonal service or a one-time rite of healing? In this case, when will this ritual take place?²
- 3) *Who is it that we hope will find healing in this service?* The person facing cancer? A group of people facing various medical situations? Family and friends? The congregation as a whole?
- 4) *What are we hoping will happen?* Many will hope for physical healing. Physical healing is only one kind of healing and we encourage you to include hope for all kinds of healing in this service, for instance, emotional healing, spiritual healing and relationship healing.³

¹ Elaine Ramshaw, “Liturgy for Healing”, pages 9-17 in *Liturgy* vol. 9, no. 4 (Fall 1991): Ritual and Reconciliation.

² James L. Brooks, *The Unbroken Circle: A Toolkit for Congregations Around Illness, End of Life, and Grief* (Durham: Duke Institute on Care at the End of Life, 2009), pp. 57-59.

³ Thomas Droege, *The Faith Factor in Healing* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991).

Thoughts to Consider:

- Ritual on a fundamental level reassures us that we are not alone even at our most vulnerable, that we are in community with the others around us, and that God enters into our suffering with us accompanying us every step along the way.⁴
- In two basic senses, cancer and other illnesses can strip away a person's agency; the illness itself constricts what we can do, and the medical establishment often dehumanizes us as we feel we are converted into a "patient". It is therefore our role in preparing ritual to highlight the person's agency so that they may be an active participant, rather than a passive recipient, in the healing process.⁵
- Another aspect of the medical experience is the isolation imposed on the person with cancer – isolation from their normal community in the sense that they may be physically in the hospital away from home, and also isolation inasmuch as they may feel others are unable to relate to what they are going through. Integration, therefore, ought to be a goal of healing ritual – integration of medical life and church life, integration into community, integration of the cancer experience into one's own identity.
- In addition to integration, the other supporting arch we suggest is movement. This can relate to the movement of the Holy Spirit, the movement of a person from one phase of the cancer journey to another, or from one set of emotions to another, or the movement of the congregation in response. Just as Jesus was always on the move, and Christian discipleship is a dynamic engagement, we suggest incorporating movement into healing ritual.
- There will be a balance to strike between the familiar and the new. In a difficult time, aspects of worship that we know well – certain prayers, scripture passages, or songs – will be helpful. At the same time, recognizing that cancer changes our lives in major and unexpected ways, there is room for the healing service to strike out in new directions, as a model for how we can grow and adopt and still encounter the sacred even in a changed and perhaps frightful new reality.⁶
- Finally, as we craft a healing ritual, we are aware of the many ways in which society as a whole needs healing as well as individuals. Among other things, we need healing from our cultural obsession with physical perfection and general denial of death. Ultimately, we need to move beyond the demarcation that society makes between those who are sick and those who are well.⁷ We believe in empowering one another to *be well* even in the midst of illness.

⁴ Bruce Epperly, Healing Worship: Purpose and Practice (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006), p. 44.

⁵ Ramshaw, p. 13.

⁶ Epperly, p. 71ff.; Brooks, pp. 10-11.

⁷ Droege, The Faith Factor, chapter 3.

Some particular questions to think about as you put all of this into practice:

- *What space will you use?* The location of the ritual is very important. We've found some benefit in using the same space as regular Sunday worship, though perhaps a particular section of it; in one church, the monthly healing prayer service takes place standing around the communion table. Holding the healing ritual in the regular worship space integrates it into a person's experience of Sunday worship, so that they will be able to connect with that ritual even when participating in regular worship that might not be focused on healing.⁸
- *How will you talk about God?* The language we use matters. There are certain attributes of God that may be more helpful to emphasize at this time – for instance, God as present, God as steadfast, God as comforter, and God as Potter may be images that can help us know God is with us as we struggle. On the other hand, images of God as judge, all-righteous, or Sovereign, may invoke feelings of guilt, either on account of something unrelated that we have done that distracts us, or perhaps because we feel we are being too selfish in asking for something for ourselves. Such language might even cause participants to wonder if they have done something to 'deserve' getting the cancer. Finally, we also recommend caution around words like omnipotent, almighty, and all-powerful—they can be immensely comforting, but can also leave people with the question “Why doesn't God just fix it?” or “Did God send this cancer as a test?” if we are not careful.⁹
- *How will you incorporate touch?* Whereas the touch of hospital/clinic staff can often be hurried, impersonal, and in the case of surgeries, even anonymous, healing in a ritual setting, where the person has given permission and shares trust with the others involved, can restore wholeness and ground our experience in the sacred geography of our own bodies.¹⁰ In every sacrament or holy ritual from any tradition, the hands are vital. Whether welcoming, baptizing with water, bestowing blessings, offering peace, raising up gifts, anointing with oil, or holding in a self-giving embrace, our hands are God's hands in the world.¹¹
- *How will you incorporate other senses?* Music, for instance, is very powerful and important for healing. Attention to genres such as congregational song, chanting, an

⁸ Brooks, pp. 30-32. Every so often, clergy express to us that they believe every worship service ought to be a healing service, or that every service they do is a healing service. We respond to this first with the hope that regular Sunday worship, generally not designed for specific persons and situations, can be complimented by additional healing ritual support. Further, we would caution that Jesus Christ calls us to the work of collective and social healing, as well as individual healing. This might involve services of repentance, lament, thanksgiving, and praise, as well as healing per se for individuals. Cf. Ramshaw, “Liturgy for Healing”, p. 11.

⁹ Brooks, p. 38; Jann Aldredge-Clanton, Counseling People with Cancer, in the series, “Counseling and Pastoral Theology”, Andrew D. Lester, series editor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

¹⁰ Epperly, p. 66.

¹¹ Jan Phillips, Divining the Body: Reclaim the Holiness of your Physical Self (Vermont: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2005) p. 44.

anthem, global song or instrumental music can set a mood and unite all who gather together in a spirit of loving community. Gentle scents either from oils, candles or other sources can awaken our sense of smell and awareness of God-with-us. Planning with sensitivity to those with allergies is crucial.¹²

- *How will people be able to express what they are feeling?* Sometimes, the opportunity to name our emotions aloud or write them down on a card during the ceremony offers those present the gift of being heard. Often, this naming and voicing itself can be enough to allow us to begin to move to a different place, leaving behind in the ritual space some of the doubts, fears, angers, and pleadings that we'd come in with.
- *How does the ritual create space for both the individual and the group?* Including both of these avenues of participation can emphasize the significance of the individual's experience in shaping and contextualizing the overall communal experience. Also, developing ways for the individual participants to bring their insights, feelings, or experiences back into the activities of the group as a whole, can help the communal activities feel fresher and more relevant. Finding ways to include *both* alone time and group time, and thinking about synchronizing the two, can foster an environment where the individual may take great comfort in the safety of the group's embrace.¹³

Details and Specific Elements:

- *Tap into images*, smells, tastes, and touch, as well as the speaking and hearing that often make up meaningful worship. This will make the service accessible to people on more levels and serve to open it up to different kinds of learning styles. Possibilities include:
 - o Sand, rocks, water, soil, plants, candles, bells, incense, apples, oranges, pears, colored fabric, dried beans, dried rice, matzoh, bread, scented oils, massages, pottery, calligraphy, artwork, photographs, needlework, and last but not least, **chocolate**.
- *Use symbols* to evoke and attend to deep longings. We advise care in selecting what symbols to use, and how many to use, so as not to overwhelm or confuse. Further, we do not believe it is in general necessary to explain what the symbol means; often enough, the symbol stands on its own and people rise to the challenge of discovering appropriate meanings.
- *Include clear beginnings and endings*. The beginning is a gathering and perhaps an invocation, establishing as a worship community those who are present. The end is a sending or closing prayer or benediction, marking the conclusion of our time together. Some rituals end with time for participants to meditate or pray on their own; this is fine, but then it will be important to establish very clearly the point at which it would be appropriate for people to begin to leave as they choose.
- *Weave in ritual elements*:

¹² Brooks, p. 27.

¹³ Epperly, p. 51.

- Confession. This may be important to include, since some participants may feel the need to confess before their relationship with God is in a place that they are comfortable asking for help. At the same time, hopefully no one takes this confession as an implication that they've done something wrong that's caused the sickness.¹⁴
- Communion/Eucharist/Lord's Supper. At one large church, designated people are available in a side chapel to offer healing prayers to anyone who requests during Communion. Since people come forward to receive communion at this particular church, there is a logical period of time within the sanctity of the Communion moment, for people to go over inconspicuously to request prayer.
- Laying on of Hands. The laying on of hands can be done with the person or people in the center, and those immediately around them placing a hand on their shoulders, and the people behind them on theirs, etc., so that everyone is connected and the community is made tangible as prayers are said.
- Prayer. One pastoral approach when someone requests a prayer, is to say, "Why don't you start us off, and I'll finish?" This opens up an option for the person to articulate their own wishes in words that feel best to them, hopefully encouraging their private prayer life. We've found no one-size-fits-all approach to how to handle prayers and petitions. Possibilities include: open prayer; prayer requests; or modified prayers of the people, in which different categories are introduced by the celebrant and participants may offer their prayers in each category (e.g. prayers for thanksgiving, prayers for personal healing, and prayers for social / international healing.)
- Follow-up. Depending on the situation, you may include following up as part of your plan. This could include prayer for the person / people involved, for instance, or possibly an additional healing ritual at the next phase of the journey.

Sample timeline for implementing a healing ritual:

¹⁴ Epperly, p. 58.

One month before the ritual	__ Think about the first and second sets of questions __ Set a date, and put it on the calendar __ Spread the word as desired
Three weeks before	__ Reflecting on the third and fourth sets of questions, develop a draft plan for what exactly will happen, and what scripture/readings/music you will include __ Confirm who will do what
Two weeks before	__ Find / borrow / purchase all of the materials you will need for the service __ Finalize and print the bulletin if there will be one __ Continue to do publicity as desired
The week before	__ Confirm your readers / musicians / etc. __ Consider asking them to participate in a dry run so that everyone will be comfortable with the flow of the service
The day of	__ Set up the space ahead of time so that everything will be prepared for when people arrive. If there will be Bible readings, have the pages marked with a bookmarks in the pulpit Bible __ Take some time before going into the service for a brief prayer, for yourself and everyone who's been involved with the planning, and for those seeking healing

Sample Service: Please see the attached bulletin, which James and Laura used for a healing service at Yale Divinity School in April, 2011.

We hope that these questions and guidelines give you some help as you develop your ritual. You may find many resources already prepared in our bibliography. Thank you for your time and interest in healing rituals!