

LAYING ON OF HANDS: in Healing.

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Part I : Understanding the Laying-on-of-Hands

1. Introduction – Ending the Confusion

The Laying-on-of hands is one of the most usual items of healing services. There has been a great increase of it in recent decades, but little attention has been given to its meaning, symbolism or practice.

The Force?

It is sometimes thought that the Laying-on-of-hands is essentially about some transfer of healing by those who have an invisible form of healing or spiritual energy. Francis MacNutt for instance quotes the scientifically demonstrated fact that the growth of seedlings can be accelerated by having hands laid over them. So what?

Popular magazine from time to time have examples of 'Kirlian photography' that shows the fingers of healers radiating 'flames' of energy like an advert for high speed gas! Is it relevant?

Spiritualists and others hold hands in a circle to create a psychic 'battery' of power into which the sick may plug! This is nothing new, and each generation has shown interest in these invisible forces, and named and renamed them – 'life force', 'prana', 'odic force', 'orgone energy', 'para-electricity', 'bioplasma' and so on. Is this what Laying-on-of-hands in Christian ministry is about?

There have always been a few who believe that the Church's Healing Ministry can be accounted for by such forces and promoted by understanding and tapping them. That such forces may be real does not make them relevant.

There is even some reference to them in Our Lord's ministry. Crowds came to him for healing because, as Luke particularly points out, '*power came out from him*'. [Luke 6:19, and compare Mark 3:10]

In the better known incident of the woman in the crowd, she believed, '*If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.*' [Mark 5:28]. But, I would point out, Jesus *corrected* her false impression by teaching that the basis of her cure was not in her physical contact with him but lay in her spiritual relationship to him, i.e. her '*faith*' [Mark 5:34].

A nun once wrote to me saying that she experienced warmth in her hands when she prayed over people. Many spiritualists would experience the same thing. She concluded, wrongly, that this indicated that she had the Christian *charism*, or gift, of healing.[1 Corinthians 12:9] While the exercise of this gift may sometimes be accompanied by warmth, tinglings, cold, and so on, such manifestations can be just human and may accompany the ministry of non-Christians.

Such phenomena have no religious or spiritual significance whatever. They are too ambiguous to base anything on them – and it is plain silly to do so. The great trap of those who have newly entered into the reality of the spiritual life is to assume that because something is *invisible* it is therefore *spiritual*, and because it is *spiritual* it is therefore of the Holy Spirit. No! No! No! Such thinking is not only wrong, but dangerous. (After all, the devil is spiritual!)

Christians must learn that the invisible world is a hotchpotch, ranging from the divine to the demonic – with humanity in between! St. John of the Cross and others warn us of the ambiguity of all such things. Warmth, tingling, and vibrations are no more spiritual than hiccoughs – and are best thought of in the same way as meaningless quirks of humanity that are a little embarrassing and should not be encouraged!

Actions speak louder...

I heard of a Christian woman, who probably regarded herself as God's gift to the Church's Ministry of Healing. She was standing in a pub with a cigarette in one hand and a drink in the other. A man present complained of asthma. She felt that he needed the Laying-on-of-hands. So, without putting down either her cigarette or her drink, she continued the conversation she was having with someone else and touched the asthmatic on the chest! How *bizarre*!

Actions speak louder than words. As wrong words deceive and lie, so wrong actions do so even more loudly. I am sure her intention was to heal, and at least she did respond to human need rather than ignore it.

Her grotesque behaviour demonstrates **the necessity for us to understand the Laying-on-of-hands and to minister it in a style that is theologically sound and pastorally appropriate in any given situation.**

As with all pastoral activities there is no one 'correct' way to minister the Laying-on-of-hands. Just as the administration of the Eucharist in a cathedral will differ from its style in an intensive care unit, so what matters most cannot be correctness but *appropriateness*. The woman's behaviour in the pub was totally *inappropriate*. Her wrong actions told lies about the source of the blessing, about God's relationship to the sufferer, and about the sufferer's worth.

Such foolishness arises from a basic failure to understand what the Laying-on-of-hands *is* in the Christian Healing Ministry. This article is completely geared to helping you make your ministry *appropriate*. To learn this we need to look firstly at Scripture.

2. The Old Testament

Surprisingly there is no account of the Laying-on-of-hands in the Old Testament being given for 'healing' in a narrow sense.

- **Blessing**

The Laying-on-of-hands is certainly used in blessing. Israel blesses his grandchildren by the Laying-on-of-hands [Genesis 48:14 and following verses.]. When a group was blessed and individual Laying-on-of-hands was impractical, Aaron '*lifted his hands towards the people and blessed them.*' [Leviticus 9:22]. Such a style of group-blessing is usual today at the conclusion of most Christian worship.

- **Commissioning**

When God appoints Joshua, Moses expresses his commissioning of him by laying hands on him. [Numbers 27:18-19]

God's work

The well-known Aaron-blessing reminds us that it is God who blesses, not us.

The Lord bless you and keep you,

The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you,

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

[Numbers 6:24 and following verses]

We can neither bless, commission, nor heal.

These are the actions of God that we may be called to symbolise.

The Laying-on-of-hands in the Old Testament is also used for

- **Dedication**
- **Sacrifice**
- **Capital offenders**

These need not concern us here. They do not concern God's action to us, but our action Godward. This distinction is an important one. The people laid hands on the Levites to dedicate them to *God* [Numbers 8:10-12]. It was a Godward act done by the people not the

priests. It does not give any Biblical basis for the laity to minister the Laying-on-of-hands to bless or heal, since the 'direction' of blessing/healing was not God-to-us but us-to-God.

(I am not saying that laity should not lay-on-hands, simply that when the people in the Old Testament laid hands on the Levites, they were not administering God's healing, so the text cannot be used as a basis for lay ministries of healing.)

Touch

Touch, but not the formal Laying-on-of-hands, was used in healing.

- Elijah stretched himself three times upon the widow's dead child [1 Kings 17:21 and following verses] and he revived.
- Elisha did much the same with the Shunammite lad [2 Kings 4:32 and following verses] with similar results.
- The accidental touch of Elisha's dead bones restored a corpse to life [2 Kings 13:21] – an odd event perhaps related to the history of healing shrines.

3. Our Lord's Practice

As in the Old Testament era, hands are laid on for

- blessing
- commissioning

Jesus blesses the children [Matthew 19:13], and the account of the Ascension tells of Christ blessing the gathering, as Aaron had done, by *lifting up his hands, he blessed them*. [Luke 24:50]

In addition, the imposition of hands was used for

- **Initiation**
- **Giving of the Spirit** [Acts 8:14ff, 19:2ff., 9:12-20. see also Hebrews 6:2 and 1 Timothy 5:22.]

Ananias laid hands on Saul for him to be filled with the Holy Spirit and to **heal** his blindness [Acts 9:17], and did so standing [Acts 22:13]. Note that Ananias was not an Apostle, but was, in modern terms, a layman.

- **Healing**

The majority of the New Testament references are, of course, for **healing**. The Laying-on-of-hands is never used as a symbol from us to God, but always God to *us*. Expressed in spatial terms Laying-on-of-hands expresses a 'downward' action of God to us, and the standing of Ananias and the authoritative '*praying over*' individuals – as taught in James [James 5:14] - is surely related to this.

I personally think that it is helpful not to distinguish too rigidly between the Laying-on-of-hands to **bless** and to **heal**, but to regard **healing** as the way that the sick are blessed. The sick will always hope a blessing results in healing!

Our Lord's practice varied enormously because he always ministered *appropriately*. And this should be true of us.

In half of the twenty-six recorded incidents of his individual healings no mention is made of touch or the Laying-on-of-hands. But of these five were demoniacs (Jesus never seems to have touched when ministering to them), and three incidents were at a distance.

Jesus's use of **touch** or the **Laying-on-of-hands** can roughly be summarised as follows:

1. Taking by the Hand

This he did, according to the earliest account, with Peter's mother-in-law [Mark 1:31, compare Matthew 8:15], and in all three accounts of the raising of Jairus's daughter [Mark 5:41, etc.] The epileptic demoniac was raised up in this way after the exorcism. [Mark 9:27]

2. Medical Touching of the Afflicted Area

Christ put mud-paste on the eyes of the man at the Pool [John 9:6], and saliva on the eyes of the blind man at Bethsaida. [Mark 8:23] He may also have used saliva when healing the deaf mute; the text is unclear. [Mark 7:33-34]

3. Non-medical Touching of the Afflicted Area

Christ touched the eyes of the blind man at Bethsaida, [Mark 8:25] and, according to Matthew, the eyes of Bartimaeus [Matthew 20:34], and the two other blind men [Matthew 9:29]. Christ touched the ear of the injured Malchus [Luke 22:51] and, appropriately, both the ears and tongue of the deaf mute [Mark 7:33].

4. Touching the Person

Matthew, Mark and Luke all record Jesus touching the leper. [Mark 1:41, Matthew 8:3, Luke 5:13]

5. Laying-on-of-hands

The term to '*lay on hands*' is used in the account of the healing of the woman bent double, [Luke 13:13] and twice in the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida. [Mark 8:23, 25]

Luke alone uses it of the evening clinic at Capernaum, [Luke 4:40] and Mark mentions it in connection with Christ's restricted ministry among the unbelievers of Nazareth. [Mark 6:5]

Interestingly, it was the Laying-on-of-hands that Jairus sought for his daughter [Mark 5:23] and what others wanted for the deaf mute. [Mark 7:32]

Jesus's responses to the request was not exactly as either party expected. By the time Jesus reached Jairus's daughter she was dead, and a raising rather than a healing was necessary.

With the man who could neither hear nor speak Jesus did not simply lay on hands. He engaged in an elaborate six-part mime to convey what he was doing – indicating, spitting, touching, looking, sighing and speaking. [Mark 7:33-34]

The accounts are sometimes very short [Matthew 9:33], and it is risky to argue from silence.

Conclusions

What can be noted from Christ's own ministry?

We can say of Christ's ministry that:

- He usually healed by the **word** spoken.
- Of the individual healing recorded in Scripture, touch or the Laying-on-of-hands accompanied only about *half* of the healings by authoritative **word**.
- There is only one case of touching to heal without accompanying words being recorded. (It was the case of Malchus's ear [Luke 22:51] which was cut off in the fracas at Gethsemane. The strange situation may more than account for it!)

The following eight points about the Laying-on-of-hands and touch may be deduced from our Lord's own ministry.

- Touch or the Laying-on-of-hands when used accompanied the healing word.
- It was not necessary. Christ usually healed without it.
- Christ seems not to have touched demoniacs. (The most obvious reason is that touch reinforces our relationship to the other *person*. But the words of exorcism are not addressed to the person who can be touched, but to the invading evil forces. To touch the *person* while addressing the *evil* tends to confuse rather than clarify what is going on.)
- Christ shows great flexibility and adaptability.
- When appropriate our Lord touched the ritually unclean like the leper and Jairus's dead daughter, [Mark 1:41, 5:41] and ignored the ritual implications [Numbers 19:11-13]. He regarded uncleanness as moral and spiritual rather than physical in origin. [Mark 7:1-23]
- Jesus was willing to take the initiative. [Luke 14:4, 22:51]
- He repeatedly responded to cries for mercy [Two Blind Men - Matthew 9:27, The Canannite Woman - Matthew 15:22, Father of the Epileptic Demoniac - Mark 9:22, Blind Bartimaeus - Mark 10:47, The Ten Lepers - Luke 17:13]
- Others noted his compassion. [Mark 1:41, Luke 7:13, Matthew 20:34]

4. The Disciples' Practice

The patterns of Our Lord's ministry emerge in the ministry of his followers. In the eight individual healings/exorcisms/raisings in the Acts of the Apostles, touch and the Laying-on-of-hands continue to be subordinate to the word.

Peter took the lame man by the hand to raise him up. [Acts 3:7]

Ananias laid hands on Saul to heal his blindness [Acts 9:12,17]

Paul laid hands on Publius's sick father, [Acts 28:8]

Paul did not touch the demoniac girl. [Acts 16:16-18]

The Apostles frequently took the initiative. [The Paralyse Aeneas - Acts 9:34, The Cripple at Lystra - Acts 14:9, The Girl with the Spirit of Divination - Acts 16:18, Eutychus - Acts 20:10, Publius's Father - Acts 28:8]

An interesting addition to these narratives is the specific mention of **prayer**.

- Peter first knelt down and prayed before raising Dorcas from the dead [Acts 9:40] – as well he might! Peter himself will later have told others of this because he was alone at the time. He may have remembered his failure to exorcise the epileptic demoniac and Christ's explaining the disciples' lack of prayer [Mark 9:29].
- Paul at Malta ministered to Publius's father *'by praying and putting his hands on him'* [Acts 28:8].

Part II : Ministering with the Laying-on-of-Hands.

5. The Ministers of Laying-on-of-Hands

Who should minister?

Scriptural practice is that it is generally the Christian leaders, although the contribution of really obedient lay-folk, like Ananias, may be very great.

Church leadership should be involved lest the healing ministry be presented as something on the fringe of Church life. Invite the Leading Pastor, the Cardinal, the Superintendent, or the Bishop!

When numbers require it, the ministers for formal Laying-on-of-hands should be the local Christian leader and his/her recognised *spiritual* assistants. I have written 'spiritual' since it is a spiritual ministry. One is not automatically qualified to do it because of one's length of service, degree of commitment, ability with finance or social standing.

It is good if those ministering can include both men and women, young and old, clerical and medical. The advantage of formal ministry is that more can do it and do it adequately.

The character and nature of those ministering are important. Folk come for the touch of Christ himself. Although we are all far from Christ-like we should at least exclude from symbolizing Christ's Person those whose lives do not build up Christ Body, the Church. (The principles of 1 Timothy 3:1-13 apply to any spiritual leadership.)

Are we 'Channels' ?

I used to accept the usual concept that I was a 'channel' for God's love and words, but I have since modified that. It might imply that the needy person *only* experiences God through what I do or say. This concept places a quite enormous burden on any conscientious minister, for each word can become a matter of life or death!

The 'channel' image always makes me think of a house fall-pipe (sometimes called drain pipes), at the top of which Almighty God was trying to pour down barrels of water, while I constituted its bottom end. Unfortunately, at the lower end, my sinfulness, disobedience, weakness and so on gummed up the pipe like an old bird's nest, letting only trickles of God's blessing reach their destination!

I do not reject such a concept, and I prepare for such ministry by deliberately tackling the bird's nest material in my life that might block God's grace.

But my experience of, among other things, God present to heal without any visible 'channels' has convinced me that it is too narrow a concept. The outpouring of his blessing is never restricted to such channels but generously overflows them.

This has, to me, made a very great difference to ministry of this kind. Instead of my being in some sense the 'key' that makes the God-person encounter possible (or inhibits it), I now regard myself much more as standing on the touch-line of an encounter *which is already taking place*.

I feel that it is not my job in praying and Laying-on-hands to direct the right amount of divine power in the right direction – like some spiritual laser! I believe instead that God and the needy person have already met; that there is a great healing encounter taking place, and that I am privileged to be in attendance, and called to symbolize visibly a little of what is going on unseen. I feel under a considerable responsibility to express this well, but I am no longer crushed by the burden that everything good will depend on my excellence.

I have not rejected the 'channel' concept but I no longer feel crushed by it. Speaking purely for myself, I think I now minister *better*. My earlier anxiety had been replaced by a greater relaxation, and my over-conscientiousness has given way to a greater liberty.

I was quite immeasurably helped by a comment of my dear friend Fr. Jim McManus C SS R (author of *The Healing Power of the Sacraments*) when he said of the Christian Healing Ministry, 'If a person is cured I don't take the credit; if they're not – I don't take the blame!' It is so easy for the normal healthy neurotic like myself to shun all the credit but wrongly to take all the blame!

Ministering in Pairs

While pairs are not essential for formal ministry, when the style chosen is semi-formal, i.e. responding extemporarily, then working in pairs is very suitable.

Ideally the two ministers should work together on more than one occasion to build up a trust and rapport. From this can flow a quality of ministry that is genuinely exciting!

It is good if the pair have complementary gifts and insights, and a man and woman team is often ideal. Another useful mix is to have an experienced minister and one fairly new to this ministry working together so that the 'junior' can learn and gain confidence by sharing.

It is particularly good to have Christians from the medical professions taking part in such teams.

The most often used arrangement is for each to take it in turn to lead the ministry with the then 'number two' supporting.

There are occasions when a knowing look from one minister will break the sequence and the 'unscheduled' minister may seem more appropriate. One may be particularly sensitive in dealing with a certain disability and may be the minister most 'natural'. When minister and patient are in the same family, then the sequence might be adjusted to whichever was felt suitable.

Ministering in pairs prevents the sufferer/needier over-identifying with a 'healing individual', and for the ministrants it is easier. It also provides a good preparation if the ministry later develops into the semi-formal.

When ministering in pairs, if one gets tired and his/her concentration lapses, a nod to the other will forego the leadership sequence for a turn or two.

The Cost

I hesitate to say anything about this at all. I want to keep it in proportion, but I hope that writing a paragraph on it will not over-emphasise it!

On balance I have decided to say something about it lest those who are new to the ministry would be discouraged or over-react to the rare bit of 'back-lash' that sometimes follows such ministry.

There is sometimes a small price to pay for ministering with the Laying-on-of-hands. It does sometimes really 'take it out of you'. Very early in my ministry I was called to anoint a child in hospital. Next day I kept saying to my wife 'Oooch, I feel as if I have been heaving furniture!' Only later did I realise that it was probably related to my ministry to the child.

If I have no idea what the precise link was, nor was I interested in knowing. I wasn't guilty about it nor did I take pride in it. I did what you would do – I turned it into thanksgiving that probably God *had* been up to something! No significance should be put on such symptoms either good or bad.

Truly Christian Healing Ministry can never be far from the Cross, and when it is rightly central then there is usually the paradox of mystery and pain within it.

6. Our Preparation for Ministering

Most public healing services have the Laying-on-of-hands in what I have termed a semi-formal style. Within the constraints of space and time the aim is to do and say what Christ himself wants said and done.

Be careful, the hallmark of what I term the semi-formal is not *informality* but the *freedom and flexibility* to **minister differently and appropriately to each person**. (This may well mean the use of formal prayer(s) if that is the most appropriate that that person at that time.)

Sometimes folk will put their needs into words, at other times the words they produce are designed – consciously or unconsciously – to conceal them!

Compare this semi-formal ministering with preaching, for instance. The preacher has *days* to prepare ministering God's *general* word to meet a group's *general* need. He has about twenty minutes to do this and delivers it 'six foot above contradiction'. He's the lucky one!

In semi-formal praying, by contrast, the minister(s) has *instantly* to convey God's *specific* word to a string of *different* people each with specific needs. He/she has no time for explicit preparation. What is said has to be delivered within about a minute and face-to-face – not in a pulpit 'six feet above contradiction'.

If preaching the Word of Christ normally requires preparation how much more does giving the Word and Touch of Christ to individuals in need? The task is awesome – but don't despair!

Suggestions

Ideally we should be in such a 'state of grace', a state of spiritual peace and sensitivity, that no preparation is necessary. That's why most of us need to prepare! To borrow the traditional words of the marriage service, such ministering should be approached '*reverently, discretely, advisedly, soberly and in the fear of God*'. Here are some suggestions to help you find your own pattern.

- a) Steep yourself in Scripture. Many appropriate words of ministry will bubble-up from this source, and, of course, Scripture will draw you generally closer to and more sensitive to the mind of God and person of God. Scripture-based hymns may have lines that are easy to remember.
 - b) Experience the Prayer with the Laying-on-of-hands in your own life, and learn at first hand its repercussions.
- It is good to experience for yourself how God can seemingly ignore your main concern, and deal with other areas which he deems are more important or more timely – and leave you to find out what he is doing!
- c) Try to avoid ministering at short notice. A week is ideal. Keep the forthcoming ministry in your prayers, and mentally 'have it on your mind'.
 - d) As the time approaches try to avoid that which would disturb your peace. Guard against wrong entertainment or over-involvement with problems. If a pattern emerges by which your pre-ministry time gets regularly disturbed – talk it over with another Christian and try and tackle the cause. Tiredness, in particular, opens the doors of our lives to influences that would want to disturb us.
 - e) Try and set aside a part of a day in preparation. God may ask you to fast and pray. Do not hesitate to fast on an earlier day than the day of ministry itself. For the latter, it may be best to keep your physical reserves strong.
 - f) Pray daily for the Holy Spirit to shed abroad in your heart God's *love* for those to whom you will be ministering. This is probably more important than anything else. If you love God and he enables you to love the person, you're pretty likely to do what God wants!

- g) Pray for the service, its planning, its ministers, those in need. Pray that God will send those of his choosing and – just as importantly – pray that he would keep away those who would not be helped by it, or who it would hinder or confuse it at this particular moment in their life. God has time on his side – let him use it.
- h) Prayer for God's presence in the building to the exclusion of all evil or personal forces that would disturb the service.
- i) Be reconciled and at peace before ministering.
- j) Use all the means of grace available and natural to you to be in spiritually good shape on the day.
- k) Get organised. Arrive early, do not be side-tracked. Do not be over-tired.
- l) If you are going to minister in pairs, try and ensure that your partner and yourself work easily and naturally together. (An early meeting of 'partners' for sharing and prayer together is a good idea.)
- m) Submit to your local leadership.
- n) Be clear about your allocation of time.
- o) Be clear about the difference between Laying-on-of-hands and counselling.
- p) Know what is expected of you and what it not.

7. Ministering the Laying-on-of-Hands

The Appropriate Style : Formal or Semi-formal

The first distinction to be made is between these two types of ministry -

- **formal**, the use of set words only
- **semi-formal**, where the minister gives an a personally appropriate prayer, sometimes after the sufferer has verbally shared his/her needs.

Formal

When formal, like the administration of the Communion Bread and Wine, the ministry is more general. The ministrants of formal Laying-on-of-hands have little *external* requirement demanded of them other than the ability to do the right action coupled with the right words. Although it is undesirable, one can 'get-away' with formal ministry without preparation and almost regardless of one's spiritual state.

Formal Laying-on-of-hands is often given to those who, for whatever reason, are unable to receive the Holy Communion, e.g. in some denominations, the young.

When formality is used rightly it is a great declaration and demonstration of God's sovereignty. Wrongly used it can become trite and meaningless. The individual blessings given by the dab-and-mutter school commit the same sin as the woman in the pub (mentioned in the Introduction). To express the loving care of God *carelessly* is theologically and pastorally *inappropriate*. Casual blessing tells lies about God, the person, and the event.

The slovenly formality of the few is what drives other ministers to want to reject formality altogether.

In formal ministry care must be taken not to trivialise the Laying-on-of-hands. Yet how often I have witnessed the Laying-on-of-hands casually given in under three seconds because 'time is short'. The truth is not that time is short, but that the time is being mismanaged!

Children in particular suffer as a result of this. This is particularly sad because the Laying-on-of-hands in blessing on children in adult worship is the natural way in which they are introduced to the healing ministry. If they are treated as second-rate by us they will not readily believe that they are first-rate to God. (See the article **Children and the Healing Ministry** on this website for much more on this subject.)

Children's meeting with God will rest largely upon the *quality of their encounter* with us. The *light of our countenance* is very important for those who have little or no sacramental theology.

Semi-formal Laying-on-of-hands

This is radically different for the ministrant even if it is perceived no differently by the sufferer. Semi-formal praying requires a very high degree of spiritual sensitivity and awareness. It is totally demanding because the succession of ministries are done extempore.

The semi-formal can only be done by being in the right spiritual state. As virtually nothing is ever written about this, I shall deal with it quite fully.

Christ taught that what we do or do not do to others we do – or not do – to him. [Matthew 25:40]

The most effective spur to our right ministering is to imagine that after a service the Risen Lord is waiting to say to you, '*It was I whom you touched and for whom you prayed...*' Aim to do it in such a way that you know he would add '*...and thank you very much indeed!*'

Distinguished from Counselling

Prayer and blessing must not be confused with counselling. They are not an impoverished version of counselling but a valid ministry in their own right.

To pray over people and give them God's blessing (whether formally or extempore) is as complete a ministry as administering Holy Communion to them or reading them Scripture. If we do these without any unease that they are 'partial', we should feel the same about the Laying-on-of-hands.

If we are not convinced that Laying-on-hands is a perfectly full and valid ministry, we may feel guilty that at a healing service so little time can be allocated to any one individual. (I have experienced healing services that have over-run by *hours*, literally, because the leaders confused *counselling* with Laying-on-of-hands with prayer.)

Many coming forward at a healing service would benefit from counselling, but public ministry, often kneeling at the communion rail, at a public service is the wrong place. It might well provide the right beginning. Quite often a new grace will be given to enable real needs to be met and to melt the pride that made earlier help impossible to accept.

Counsellors, and a quiet place for counselling ought to be available at public healing services, not as an advertised ministry, but as a private back-up ministry should pastoral situations arise. The distraught and very troubled can be gently led off to a quiet room, or corner, where they can be in private and caring hands.

Here are some further points related to the counselling demand:

1. When the prayer and Laying-on-of-hands ministry is described at a service, what is expected can and should be outlined. For example: *Those who want to be prayed over and individually blessed with the Laying-on-of-hands, go forward. . . You'll appreciate that this is not an opportunity for counselling, but if you have a topic for which you would particularly like prayer, do mention it briefly to the ministers.'*
2. Those ministering will be helped by the conviction that our Lord knows all about the troubled situation, and does not need to be told the sufferer's one-sided and partial version of it! Christ's healing touch does not first depend on God the Father being told the entire case-history!
3. Ministers will also be helped by the assurance that the healing event in which they are engaged is but one in a life-long programme that God is working-out in the person's history. Our ministry is not God's one-and-only chance to do everything in the person's life. Our ministry will not set the sufferer free from life's problems, and even the most miraculous cure does not guarantee permanent health or life. Even Lazarus died!
4. We are not the 'Lord' of the sufferer's history. Our ministry is just one step. Many other will have been, and will be involved, past and future. We are one of a large team.
5. The limitations and opportunities of such ministry are shown by the following story. I recall, years ago, inviting another minister to a monthly service with the Laying-on-of-hands of my then parish intercession group. The numbers were small, and I regularly prayed over them. I invited him, therefore, to lay-on-hands and to lead the ministry over each person.

On three occasions he ended his ministry with the words 'I think we ought to have a chat afterwards'. I knew the individuals well – how right he was!

He not only knew when counselling was appropriate, but his experienced told him that the communion rail at public service was not the place for it!

Discernment

The follow-up to the ministry just described is worth relating. I was present when this pastor saw each of the three whom he had discerned needed counselling. I was very impressed. I recall one in particular. He said to the lady, 'My poor dear, you've suffered an enormous personal loss, haven't you?' She immediately broke down and cried. Her brother had died. I, her parish priest, had never known of it because she had kept her grief to herself.

The gifts of such spiritual insight have enriched the Church of every age, and have characterised the ministries of so many of her pastors. Of the Curé d'Ars it has been written 'It quickly became common knowledge that the Abbé Vianney could read men's consciences and was reputed to work miracles.' More recently, such gift-abilities, or *charisms*, have graced the 'renewal' or *charism*-atic movement, and been equated with St. Paul's '*gift of knowledge*' [1 Corinthians 12:8] although not traditionally so interpreted by some Protestant Christians.

The terminology does not concern me, but the need for spiritual sensitivity does. Spiritual insight may well be founded upon professional capabilities or natural gifts, but experience shows that it can at times be quite remarkably different.

The Pentecostal pastor probably discerned my parishioner's bereavement when he prayed over her. If he did, he was wise and mature enough only to use that insight at the right time and place. The public service would not have been the right time for her – or anybody else – for the surfacing of her grief.

Such gifts of the Holy Spirit differ from human psychic awareness. The latter may be a person's permanent ability in which the unknown constantly intrudes for good or ill. A *spiritual* gift is given only when appropriate to make a positive pastoral contribution, and only as occasion demands. Our Lord had such insight into the life of the Samaritan woman at the well [John 4:18] and Peter knew the dishonesty in the hearts of Ananias and his wife. [Acts 5:3 and following.]

Experiencing such a gift is a mixed blessing. With it comes the responsibility of knowing when, where and how to use it. I expect I lack the maturity to wield it wisely, for I have rarely experienced it.

The Appropriate Touch

We have to be careful nowadays when touching others. We each have our own 'space bubble' around us, with very strict rules about who can invade it and how. This is right. Touching

usually expresses intimacy, whether of parents and children or those in love. Spiritual ministry of necessity also operates at a degree of intimacy that some people might not otherwise experience.

When personal matters are shared with us, and when we touch those to whom we are ministering in Christ's name, we are on hallowed ground.

There are various ways in which the hands may be laid. If the person kneels before you and bows his/her head over-much – the choice is limited! (Hats are rarely a problem nowadays. If one appears don't embarrass the person by requiring her to remove it, simply lay hands on her shoulders.)

It is difficult, I think, to get the pressure right. If it is a purposeful act, not a vague or tentative one, the person should not require faith to know that it is happening! On the other hand there are many common states of illness or weakness where too heavy a hand for too long upon the head is intolerable. An upright head brings the least strain to the sufferer. My own experience of receiving the Laying on of hands is that ministers tend to be too heavy. (I write as a long-term sufferer of M.E. (C.F.S.) who receives the Laying on of hands about once a month.)

If two are ministering together a hand each on the person's head seems natural, with the spare hands resting on the shoulders. But avoid the tendency among some, especially when ministering in pairs, for neither to lay hands on the person's head, and to end up with what I call 'blessing of shoulder-pads'!

In some cases the additional touching or holding of a person's hand is very appropriate.

The way to hold the head of another for their greatest feeling of security is, as some suggest, to hold their head cradled with a hand fore n' aft like holding a rugby ball! If the primary need is for comfort this may be right, but I react against it since it is not the same style in which the Laying-on-of-hands is given on other occasions. To have the Laying-on-of-hands ministered in the similar style for Confirmation, Ordination, commissioning, etc., keeps healing related to the whole witness and mission of the Christian life.

If it is visually not clear whether the person is symbolically being healed by Christ or sent out by him [Acts 6:6, 13:3], this is no bad thing. Christian healing is best understood as equipment for Christian service and witness. [Mark 1:31, 5:19]

For those for whom the signing of the Cross is meaningful, the sign may be traced on the brow with the thumb of one hand. For many this will positively relate to and renew their earlier Baptism and/or Anointing. (See also the article **Anointing with Oil - in the Bible and Today** on this website.)

If the Trinitarian blessing is given, such signing would most naturally be done to coincide with the words 'Father...Son...Spirit.'

The Appropriate Word

In formal usage the words of the prayer are 'set', but that does not mean that only one prayer should be used. Ideally the minister should know the words by heart. Here are some suggestions.

1. '*The Touch of Christ*' In a Communion setting where the phrase '*The Body of Christ*' and '*The Blood of Christ*' were used this may be appropriate. It has the merits – in such a setting – of being clearly sacramental, and linked closely to the Communion. It avoids individualism. It has strong Scriptural overtones.

2. A Christian blessing should be Christian, and therefore should if possible be Trinitarian. (If there's 'no time for that', get things changed so that there is!). Here is an example of mine –

***May the love of God the Father,
the presence of the Risen Christ
and the healing* of the Holy Spirit
overflow your heart and your home,
this day and ever more. Amen.***

[* *power* may be substituted or added]

It has three phrases relating to the Trinity which are simple to grasp and easy to learn.

The somewhat unusual word '*overflow*' begins to indicate the outworking of blessing beyond oneself rather than the easier self-centred concept.

The phrase '*heart and home*' attempts to express Christ's touch upon the real person and the whole person in their particular situation with its particular relationships. Home – to which most will shortly return – is part of what they offer to Christ, and part of what receives his blessing.

It is not difficult to compose such prayers. Here's one I made earlier (as they say!) – it has the merit of being Trinitarian, and its three requests, to *remake*, *redeem*, *renew* are deliberately related to God's work in Creation, God's work in Redemption, and God's work in Sanctification. If you are composing such prayers yourself the use of alliteration in *remake*, *redeem* and *renew* make it easier for both the minister and the sufferer to remember.

***May the Love of the Father remake you,
May the Cross of the Lord Jesus redeem you.
May the Fire of the Holy Spirit renew you.***

If a prayer is to last and to be remembered, it has to be firm in its structure, tidy in its form, and regular in its beat. [See the article *Healing Prayers based on Scripture* on this website.] Jesus regularly taught this way. [Matthew 7:7-8]

3. It is not necessary to quote Scripture to be Scriptural, as I hope my examples have already shown. If you wish to use Scripture, then variations of 1 Thessalonians 5:23 are often used as it is perhaps the nearest Scripture gets to a definition of health. This version is the Revised Standard Version [When 'wholly' is heard rather than read it is indistinguishable from 'holy'.

The R.S.V. has this, but my usual NRSV translation misses the double meaning by having 'entirely'.]

***May the God of peace sanctify you wholly,
and my your spirit and soul and body
be kept sound and blameless
at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.***

4. The late George Bennett used this –

***The healing mercies of our risen Lord Jesus Christ present with us now
fill your whole being, body, mind, soul and spirit, and heal you.
May he do away from you all that harms or hurts you
and give you his peace.***

5. The Methodist Church produced one that is certainly easier to learn by heart,

***May the Lord Jesus
grant you healing and renewal.
Go in peace.***

The briefer the prayer the stronger it has to be. This prayer is good. In the following notes I will explain what I would do to make it even better, since you may find my reasoning helpful.

[I would do the following:

Change *May the Lord* to *May our Lord* – this adds the dimension of Christian community, fellowship and the unity of minister and sufferer.

As there is no mention of the Father and the Spirit, I would give Jesus his full titles in order to give him total emphasis at the start of the prayer. I would add '*Christ*' to *Lord Jesus*.

Grant you healing and renewal. 'Healing' and 'Renewal' are things, nouns (like 'ham' and 'eggs').

They are the words we use to cover God's actions, what he does. In the context of a sufferer who longs for the miraculous touch of Jesus it seems more appropriate to me to use **doing** words (verbs) rather than thing-words (nouns).

We're praying that God will *do* something. I would therefore change

grant you healing and renewal

to

heal you and renew you.

Go in peace. A three-syllable finale tends to fade-away in spoken English, an extra syllable would emphasise it more and help prevent this. I would add a word *Go forth in peace.*

My revision changes –

May the Lord Jesus grant you healing and renewal. Go in peace
to

May our Lord Jesus Christ heal you and renew you. Go forth in peace.

If you get a prayer that you think is good, don't be afraid to hone it for maximum impact and better use.]

Praying informally

I have given various set forms above.

Here are some things to bear in mind when you are praying in response to a person's spoken needs.

1. Do not be afraid to respond formally (in whole or part) if a known formal prayer obviously applies. It is likely to be richer than anything you can produce off-the-cuff. The more you know by heart the better. It might be a Scripture or part of a verse of a hymn.

2. Do not regard praying extempore and praying formally as rigid alternatives. A modification of something already known may have the strength of content and the merit of relevance.

3. If you are praying extempore, pray as you *can*, not as you *can't*! Do not pretend to be some spiritual giant. You shouldn't be out to impress anybody.

4. Don't forget GOD! A focus upon God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit will often eclipse or bypass problems about the 'correct' way to pray. If, as is true for most of us most of the time, you haven't the slightest idea what God is doing or intends to do, base your prayers not on guesswork, but on what you know to be true. God is the only subject you can speak about with utter confidence.

5. If there is a person before you who cannot walk, and you do not know what God will do, use a prayer that centres on God. In not forgetting God, we will avoid praying those dreadful prayers of diagnosis, in which the sufferer's recently listed complaints are repeated to God by the minister.

O God, our brother/sister here was in so much pain last night, and the recent pills seem to be making things worse. Now he/she is being sick every morning, and get's cramp if he/she walks too far, so can't walk the dog any more, so her neighbour is taking Fido out every morning, but the garden is in a mess because she cannot bend due to her damaged spine because of falling off her bike during the War...

In Laying-on-hands we are not informing God of needs he already knows, but reflecting the fact, by word and action, that he is present and meeting them.

6. My own rule for most informal occasions in praying is, 'When in doubt, go Trinitarian'. When our ears and minds are awash with pastoral details, a retreat into God and a God-based prayer is usually a solution. The needy are not helped by thin religious sentiment or claptrap.

They need prayers of strength. This strength is not achieved by volume, fervour or outlandish promises – though there are clearly some who think so!

The strength required is that of God himself. Trinitarian praying which focuses on the character, work and power of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, provides strength of the right sort, and avoids all the common pitfalls.

7. In general I use the person's *name*. I would usually ask a person's name last thing before praying for them. My short-term memory is very poor, so I am more likely to remember it if I use it immediately after I have been told it! The terms 'our bother' and 'our sister' can be a good substitute when the name escapes you. Anything we can do to lessen your mental load, the less mental clutter you will have, and the freer you will be in your ministry to hear God and respond accordingly.

8. Those being Prayed-over

It is beyond the scope of this article to say much about those who receive the Laying-on-of-hands, although I shall do that in a later article, together with guidance about how to prepare for such ministry.

The person before us is there not out of adoration for God, but because of their needs – or the needs of someone close to them.

We may feel compassion, yet, however helpful in another situation, compassion by itself is not our ministry in that situation. Compassion is to *suffer-with* somebody, that is not our ministry when we Lay-on-hands. Indeed, you might have to fight against feelings of compassion in order to cope.

Insofar as we reflect something of God's love and power 'over' the circumstances, we need to keep some distance from the centre of the suffering so that it does not swamp us or dictate to us. We will need consciously to move to the centre of God if we are to reflect his person, his love, and his touch.

The snag is that the sufferer is to us very visible and perhaps very audible. God is neither, yet it is his invisible and silent Presence which is all-important, and upon whom everything depends. We can give the sufferer nothing. We cannot bless, we cannot heal, we cannot reconcile, we cannot forgive, we cannot transform, we cannot bring light, we cannot bring hope, we cannot give eternal life. God can do all these things that we cannot do, are much much more.

In the context of healing ministry, the sufferer needs to feel God's strength. These familiar words sum up well what the sufferer needs to feel and to know –

***The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ
the love of God and
the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.***

Wonder of wonders is that God will act in wonderful ways when, in the Name of Jesus, we prayerfully minister to another the Touch of Christ. The sufferer is the centre of God's love and attention and presence. God plans that he or she will become Burning Bushes of his Presence, and it is as if for our childish delight and encouragement he allows us to strike the match! But it is his flame, not ours. We can have no delusions or grandeur, nor dare we think he have power.

The person before us is in some sense God's 'hallowed ground'. We marvel that God can love such odd scraps of humanity as we shall see kneeling before him. You and I matter to God, of course, but in the healing encounter of the Laying-on-of-hands, that truth rightly gets eclipsed because of the overpowering knowledge and conviction that 'The Lord is Here' and loves the one before us and to whom we minister in Jesus's name.

Children

Children, especially younger ones, should be ministered to eyeball-to-eyeball. Since most church architecture positions them if kneeling, at the shin level of adults, they should stand. The Jews were right, the essence of blessing is the light of God's countenance shining upon us and giving us peace. We should reflect that. It is good if children in particular are addressed by name.

One vicar whom I assisted used to crouch right down to address children at the Communion rail. Before he laid hands on them he would say, 'Hello! What's your name?' Child or parent would reply. Then he would say, 'We're going to ask Jesus to bless you. Would you like that?' The child would generally nod, and/or the parent say 'Yes *please!*' Then he would give a full Trinitarian blessing. Sound practice!

If adults Christians feel it right, as they often do, to deprive children at Holy Communion of what they themselves receive, we at least owe it to children to ensure that what they receive is not casual and negative, but rich and generous. Only a generous ministry of time and attention is theologically sound and pastorally appropriate.

Mothers-to-be

When mothers-to-be come for blessing, it is usual to add a special prayer or blessing for the unborn child. With so many in society accepting the killing of the unborn child as quite normal, Christians should encourage everything that reaffirms the love God has for the unborn child and the value he places on them.

Disabled

Provision should always be made to bless in the pew those who desire it but are unable to come forward. (Future church architecture should ensure that there is at least one wheelchair route to the communion rail.)

By Proxy ?

Virtually every public healing service will include those who come for Christ's touch not for themselves but for another. It may be for a relation or another member of the spiritual family.

The issue has been debated in the church press, and it seems to be a deep and instinctive action of caring people.

The late George Bennett testified from his vast and world-wide experience that he had hardly had a service in which clergy or members of religious orders had not come forward for blessing by proxy. The practice is likely to be always with us.

Does Scripture give us any guidelines? There is no New Testament example of this particular use. There is, however, ample evidence of healing taking place at a distance which has in some sense been 'bridged' by a person or thing coming between Christ and the sufferer.

[Mark 7:29-30, Luke 7:10, John 4:50, Mark 5:28, 6:56, Acts 5:15, 19:12]

If a robe, a cloth, or a shadow even, can bring Christ's healing to the sick, one can hardly – on Biblical grounds – prevent a praying Christian whose loving care prompts him/her to do the same!

In situations where Laying-on-of-hand is requested by proxy there are two people in need: the sick person and the individual who has asked for the prayer. This has always led me first to pray for the sufferer with the Laying-on-of-hands by proxy. Then, as if ministering to two people – to pray for the person before me with the Laying-on-of-hands.

Sometimes the burdens carried by those alongside the ill are greater than the burden of the actual sickness. God is generous. I am sure he does not want such people leaving church without a renewed awareness that God is very specially with *them*, on whom they have been able to cast their burden because God cares for them. [1 Peter 5:7]

A surprising number of people who have the Laying-on-of-hands on behalf of another are themselves blessed or healed. (I suspect that this is related to their freedom from self-preoccupation so that God's healing grace within them has less barriers to overcome than is usual with most of the rest of us.)

At Whose Dictates?

Ministers involved with the Laying-on-of-hands need, on some occasions, to be quite firm if they have an individual who seems intent on pouring out his or her life history. Waiting in hope for a break may be to court disaster. You must interrupt and take this sort of line:
I realise that you have a lot you would like to share with me. But it is for the Touch of Jesus on your life that you have come. He knows everything about you and your situation. I am going to ask him to touch your life (anew) and I will express this by the Laying-on-of-hands – NOW – after a moment's quiet! If, after the service, you would like to talk to someone, approach one of the stewards and they will arrange it. Let's be quiet now..... I will pray.

Husbands & Wives

In public healing services it will often be noted that husbands and wives join the queue for prayer.

Most often folk will kneel side by side, but sometimes, to encourage privacy and if numbers are not great, the system will be for one individual to go to one side and the next individual to

the other. If you notice a husband-and-wife in this sort of situation, invite them to come together, but do not insist on it. The majority appreciate such sensitivity, but a few will choose to be ministered to independently. It depends, of course, on their needs at any given time.

9. Let God and Let Go !

Perhaps the most important thing to learn in such ministry is to *let go*. As you move to the next person, don't forget to *leave* the last, mentally and for good. (Unless they reappear in later pastoral care.)

There is a great temptation to cling, mentally and spiritually, to 'mother' everything that comes our way. There are many causes of this. Among them is our own need to matter; our inability to be still; our pride in lording it over others; our enjoyment of power; our desire to justify ourselves by our Christian busy-ness, and so on.

Our Lord's command to Mary Magdelene not to cling to him [John 20:17] says much about the style of Christ's ministry as well as about Mary. Earlier Christ had instructed the Apostles and the Seventy to cope with rejection by a symbolic act of shaking the dust off their feet before moving on [Mark 6:11, Luke 10:10-11]. It is not only resentment and hurt that we can 'harbour'; the objects of our care and concern too can get trapped within us.

Our ministry will survive only if we learn to let go one ministry and move on to the next.

Use anything that works for you to accomplish this: a long walk, a hot bath, a holiday novel. Never ever, ever, ever carry today's pastoral load overnight for tomorrow. Place it back into the Father's hands where it belongs and where it is safest. Christ's yoke is easy and burden light only to those who have the common-sense of oxen, and let Christ remove the yoke after the day's work is done!

Don't be misled by nagging thoughts about not really caring and treating people casually. It is better to minister for four decades having learnt the discipline of letting go and moving on, than to minister just for four years – or even four *months!* - because of a failure to do so.

Later disciples inherited Jesus's advice and took it.

'They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas ...so they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.' [Acts. 13:50-52]

They had learned to let go and move on. Their ***filling with joy and with the Holy Spirit*** probably required an earlier off-loading and emptying of pastoral burdens. A good cook frequently washes his/her hands to prevent mix and muddle. We too need to start afresh after ministry.

Since we neither take the credit nor the blame for what God does or does not do we should not develop a score-keeping mentality. A certain detachment has the added advantage of helping

us to come to each pastoral situation afresh, and we are less likely to fall into the trap of repeating yesterday's actions as a formula for today's success.

Once the art of touching has been learned, then comes the all-important art of letting go!

This article should have given you an understanding of the Laying-on-of-hands in Christian Healing Ministry, and an awareness of what is involved.

There are three persons involved from which the following three questions arise.

- What does the sufferer need?
- What will God do?
- What should the minister do?

No article can tell you what to do within so imponderable a situation. It's very difficulty throws us back personally upon God's guidance and resources. But that is the answer! Then all is well, for it is in him – and only in him - that there is no difficulty at all!

[This article is a re-written and re-arranged version of chapters VI and XII in my book *The Question of Healing Services*, available from **Renewal Servicing** – see the books page on this website.]