

Anointing Service

INTRODUCTION

Anointing has been used for generations by the Church of the Brethren as a rite for healing. Brethren today anoint for many different reasons, including physical and emotional health well-being, commissioning for leadership, and spiritual renewal. Considering the interdependence of the body, mind, and spirit—and the stress that comes from contemporary lifestyles—the church is called to plan more creative uses of this historic Brethren ordinance.

Brethren believe that God intends people to be whole in body, mind, and spirit. The anointing service recognizes that wholeness is experienced only as a person's relationship to God and others is open and honest. One becomes whole as his or her relationship with God and the faith community is renewed.

When illness is deeply influenced by spiritual and emotional conditions, by separation from loved ones (whether in home or church), by real or perceived loss, by lack of meaning in life, or by a sense of guilt, certain possibilities for health open up when a biblical teaching and a healing rite with historic roots are lived out in a congregational setting.

Anointing with oil for healing is a means of God's grace and blessing intended to bring restoration of wholeness and health.

BIBLICAL BASIS FOR ANOINTING

Anointing is a practice based on scripture. The covenant we have with God is rooted in Hebrew scripture and fulfilled in the new covenant in Christ (Gen. 5:1-32; Gen. 12:1-3; Mark 14:24; 1 Cor. 11:25).

Anointing with oil is associated with the covenantal relationship throughout the Old Testament. Leaders, such as priests and kings, were anointed for their special tasks (Exod. 29:7; 1 Sam. 10:1, 16:1-13; 2 Sam. 2:4). A person was anointed for comfort (Psa. 23:5) and for strength (Deut. 33:24). Anointing oil was used in the cleansing ritual for lepers (Lev. 14:15-18). Even objects in the tabernacle were anointed for use in worship (Exod. 30).

The covenantal relationship is renewed in the New Testament as a form of the church's ministry to the sick. Jesus and the disciples spent considerable time healing and casting out demons. The Gospel of Luke alone records 26 healing incidents. The other Gospels also note healing ministries. The Gospel of Mark specifically mentions anointing with healing (Mark 6:5, 12-13). James provides instructions for anointing the sick with oil (Jas. 5:13-18).

REASONS FOR ANOINTING

Traditionally, Brethren have anointed for three reasons: the forgiveness of sin; the strengthening of one's faith; the healing and wholeness of body, mind, and spirit according to God's grace and wisdom. Often these reasons are stated when the oil is placed on the head of the one anointed, although other statements that are more appropriate to the situation may be used.

Anyone who is sick in body, mind, or spirit and has faith in God may call for anointing. Such a person may desire the anointing as a spiritual blessing, as an aid toward the restoration of health, and as a means to the healing of a relationship. Some of the many times anointing is appropriate include:

- when one is experiencing a decline in health, is suffering from a disease, has incurred an injury, or is experiencing emotional illness;
- when one is experiencing depression or disillusionment;
- before scheduled surgery;
- before making a weighty decision;
- when one has received word of terminal illness;
- when one is unconscious (anointing is then requested for the ill person);
- after a marital separation or divorce;
- after a miscarriage or the death of a loved one;
- in connection with the loss of a job;
- when there is fracture between friends, colleagues, family members, or within the church body;
- when one is making a commitment to significant service.

Pastors are encouraged to inform parishioners about the Church of the Brethren's historic rite of anointing and its varied contemporary uses.

Pastors may be asked to anoint persons, including young children and babies, who are unable to comprehend the meaning of the service. In such cases, the caretakers and relatives may call for anointing for the sick person, perhaps requesting anointing for themselves as well, to strengthen their own faith and comfort them in their ministry to the sick person. Jesus performed some of his greatest miracles of healing because of the faith of friends or relatives. When the service is performed for individuals as an expression of the faith of others, the officiant should modify the service, deleting the sections requiring a response from the one being anointed. The anointing then is upon the person's former statement of faith or upon the faith of those requesting the anointing.

Anointing in the Church of the Brethren is not used as extreme unction or last rites. However, some persons near death may ask to be anointed as a celebration of the life they have lived with and for others, as a healing of relationships, and as a farewell. At such a time, anointing is appropriate for giving comfort and peace to the one committed to God's love and care, and for those who are dealing with the imminent loss of the one they love.

PREPARATION FOR THE ANOINTING SERVICE

Prior to the anointing service, the officiant will want to select the scripture readings and hymns to be used in the service and prepare the anointing oil. Many scripture readings provide strength and peace at a time of illness or despair. The Psalms offer words of trust, comfort, and God's faithfulness. Selected verses on the skill of the doctor and the healing of God can be found in the Apocrypha (Ecclesiasticus 38). Readings from Mark 6 and 10 tell of the healing ministry of Jesus. Other readings are suggested in resource books. The topical index in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* gives a listing of hymns on healing and wholeness, reconciliation and peace.

Traditionally, oil for anointing has been made from the fruit of the olive tree. The olive branch symbolizes reconciliation and wholeness of life. Any type of oil may be used in the service, but usually it is olive oil or baby oil put into a small vial. A hint of perfumed scent may be added to baby oil if there are no known allergies.

Anointings are performed in the privacy of a home, in a semi-private place such as a hospital room or church parlor, or in a church sanctuary during a worship service. In a public setting, the anointing needs to be prefaced by adequate interpretation, not only to enable members of the congregation to participate in prayers for healing, but also to provide a learning experience regarding this unique ministry. When anointing is private, the pastor will begin with words of introduction.

Whether public or private, it is most helpful when the pastor is able to have a private talk with the person to be anointed before the actual service. This provides opportunity for reviewing the meaning and purpose of the service, stressing its particular ministry—the wholeness of body, mind, and spirit—and its compatibility with medical and therapeutic skills. It also provides an opportunity for the one being anointed to talk privately about any concern or confession that weighs heavily on his or her mind.

The service itself witnesses to a spiritual reality that moves beyond the most skillful human attention. It does this by engaging spiritual and psychological energies in order to help the person—through confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation—to receive release from any fear, anxiety, resentment, sense of guilt, or wrong relationship that might block healing.

During the preparatory time the pastor spends with the person to be anointed, it is appropriate to raise the issue of confession and forgiveness. The person may be encouraged to talk about the nature of the illness or distress, any problems or anxieties relating to it, or any relationships or experiences that give a feeling of separation from God or others. Opportunities for confession or sharing of faith as a part of the service may be discussed. The pastor may also wish to go over the reasons for anointing and the three statements that will be used when the oil is to be placed on the forehead. (Oil may be placed elsewhere if injuries dictate.) The pastor should clarify functional details as to time, place, persons to be present, and preferences for a person to assist in the service.

The service has historically been performed by two ordained ministers, or an ordained minister assisted by a deacon or a specially selected layperson. When the situation is urgent and there is

no ordained minister available, any Christian may perform the service. Generally it is preferable for two representatives of the church to take part in the service.

Those who administer the service need to clarify their ministry and their specific responsibilities. It is advisable for them to spend some moments in prayer before the service, reminding themselves that they are witnesses to God's blessings and asking God to prepare them for administering the service through which blessing may come to the one being anointed.

THE ANOINTING SERVICE

The anointing service is most effective when done simply and expediently. The service may include introductory words; scripture; a hymn (optional); a statement by the person who is to be anointed; the anointing itself; the laying on of hands and prayer; the Lord's Prayer; benediction; and parting words of comfort, assurance, and blessing.

Any visiting and fellowship should take place before the service begins. At that time, the officiating minister should indicate that, after the service, those participating will leave promptly after brief words of encouragement and support are given so the one anointed has time for personal reflection and prayer.

AN ANOINTING SERVICE

Welcome and Words of Explanation

Scripture

The pastor or an appointed person may read appropriate scriptures, concluding with the passage from James 5:13-16. Following are two translations of this scripture.

A

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

B

Are there any among you depressed? Let them pray. Are any cheerful? Let them sing. Are there any among you sick? Let them summon the elders of the church, and let the elders pray over them, in the name of the Lord. Prayer offered in good faith makes whole those who are sick. The Lord will restore them, and if any have committed sins, he will forgive them. So then confess your sins to each other, and pray for each other, so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person works with profound effect.¹

Prayer of Preparation

God of numberless blessings, we ask for a special blessing in these moments. Bless us with a keen awareness of your presence. Be with us as we gather in the name and spirit of Christ, the great physician. Be with us to hear the thoughts expressed in words and the longings too deep for words. Be with us to calm anxiety, to forgive sin, to ease pain.

God of relentless love, you are always more willing to give than we are to receive. Open our hearts to receive your gifts of love. Amen.

Hymn

(optional)

Invitation to Confession and Sharing

Here the minister may use either of the following invitations:

(name of person to be anointed), so far as you know, are you at peace with God, or is there anything in your life that you believe might prevent you from receiving the full blessing of God? (name), are there any thoughts or feelings you wish to share?

Here the minister may pause to give opportunity for the person being anointed to make any statement she or he may wish to make. Then the minister may say:

God accepts us in our brokenness. God is faithful and just. We are comforted in the assurance that, as we confess our sin, God forgives us, and cleanses us from all unrighteousness. We believe, (name), that even those things that may be forgotten, or that may be too deep for words, are not beyond God's forgiving love. May God, who knows us completely, now bless you through this service.

Anointing

The following statement, or others that are appropriate to the situation, may be spoken:
(name), upon your confession of faith in the love and power of God, your willingness to commit your life completely to God in sickness or in health, and your desire to live your life for God's glory, you are now being anointed with oil in the name of God, for the forgiveness of your sins, for the strengthening of your faith, and for healing and wholeness according to God's grace and wisdom.

A few drops of oil may be placed on the palm of the officiant's hand and then gently touched with the fingers on the forehead of the person three times, once as each purpose is stated.

Laying on of Hands and Prayer

Those conducting the service lightly lay their hands together on the head of the person being anointed and each may offer a brief prayer, closing with the Lord's Prayer in unison. Others also may be invited to offer a brief prayer. All in attendance may wish to join hands in a circle or lay their hands lightly on the shoulders of the ones closest to the one anointed.

Benediction

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

from Romans 15:13

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR ANOINTING

Anointing Before Surgery

(name), you are anointed as an act of simple obedience. We come together before God and with one another, claiming Christ's promise that wherever two or three gather in his name, he is there in their midst.

(name), you are anointed as an act of penitence. We confess before God and one another that we all need the forgiveness and wholeness made possible by Christ's forgiving spirit.

(name), you are anointed as an act of petition. We ask before God and one another that we be renewed in the hope that holds firm even in those moments when we echo Christ's own lament, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—the hope that permits us to know that even in the midst of suffering and pain we have been bound to God and each other by cords of compassion and ropes of love, which nothing in all creation can ever tear apart.²

Anointing for Reconciliation

(name), you are anointed in the name of God "who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation."

2 Corinthians 5:18b

(name), you are anointed in the name of Jesus who "is our peace" and "has broken down the dividing wall [of] hostility between us."

Ephesians 2:14

(name), you are anointed in the name of the Spirit who empowers us to "be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven" us.

Ephesians 4:32

With this anointing, symbolizing your innermost and deepest desire for reconciliation, receive now, in faith and reality, the gifts of reconciliation, healing, restoration, and peace!³

Anointing After a Broken Relationship

(name), you are anointed for release from past actions that brought you pain and fracture in a meaningful relationship.

(name), you are anointed for healing of a bitter outcome in your special relationship, and for courage to regain trust in personal friendships.

(name), you are anointed for the strengthening of your faith in God, and in the self-confidence that God gives you.⁴

Anointing During Grief

(name), you are anointed in the faith that God, who is the author and finisher of life, will sustain you in the valley and the shadow of death.

(name), you are anointed into the hope that God, who creates all of life, also recreates life anew, transforming even death to life eternal.

(name), you are anointed for the abiding love that God, who through Christ first claimed us, brings always into our midst. God's love is a love that will never let you go and will bind you together with all believing people as God's family.

Let this faith, this hope, and this love sustain you, and may God always sustain you. Amen.⁵

Anointing After Divorce

To be alive is to know the possibility of pain. Our *(sister/brother)* has come to know the pain of separation, of alienation. We believe that God wills for us health of mind, of body, of human relationships. We believe, too, that all healing has its source in God. Living in this faith, we claim the divine promise of healing for our *(sister/brother)*.

(name), you are anointed for repentance, recognizing that all of us have known and contributed to brokenness.

(name), you are anointed for faith, that your trust in God's love and power may be confirmed and strengthened.

(name), you are anointed for healing, that you may be restored to the wholeness of being that God wills for all who have experienced pain.⁶

ENDNOTES

1. Brethren New Testament translation from *Texts in Transit*, by Graydon F. Snyder and Kenneth M. Shaffer, Jr. Copyright © 1976 Brethren Press, Elgin, Ill.
2. Warren F. Groff in *We Gather Together: Worship Resources for the Church of the Brethren*. Copyright © 1979 Brethren Press, Elgin, Ill., adapted.
3. Harold Z. Bomberger in *We Gather Together: Worship Resources for the Church of the Brethren*, adapted.
4. Nancy Rosenberger Faus
5. Robert E. Faus in *We Gather Together: Worship Resources for the Church of the Brethren*, adapted.
6. Kenneth L. Gible in *We Gather Together: Worship Resources for the Church of the Brethren*, adapted.