



A SERVICE OF HEALING (for those suffering emotional distress, grief, divorce, and physical ailments)

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. History

Divine healing occurs when God restores “wholeness of body, mind, spirit, and relationships.”¹ In the lection for today, Isaiah 41:9-10, God reassures Israel that despite their hurt and feeling of rejection the Creator is with them and is their source of strength. God desires that broken people know that they are not alone: God and the Christian community are with them.

During his ministry, Jesus was drawn to the diseased, the lowly, and excluded persons of society. He affirmed marginalized bodies and was willing to touch persons on the fringes of society, including lepers, the blind, the deaf, the lame, and many individuals with troubled mental states. His life, ministry, death, and resurrection demonstrated God’s willingness to be in relationship with all types of people, including broken and diseased bodies.²

Historically, many African American churches have represented God’s loving touch to marginalized and broken people.³ From the era of slavery to the present, some examples of ministerial outreach and support services in black churches include assistance to runaway slaves, services for emancipated slaves, ministry to children in the foster care system, to youth in gangs, to persons infected with HIV and AIDS, to persons with physical and mental disabilities, to persons in recovery

and drug treatment programs, to ex-offenders, and in some churches to persons who have been alienated because of their sexual orientation and preferences. By representing God's loving presence through various support programs, many black churches have been agents of healing.



During traditional services of healing, African American Christians come together and often join hands in prayer "touching and agreeing" on behalf of afflicted people. In faith, they believe and seek God to bring healing and wholeness (Matthew 18:19). They confess their sins, repent, seek forgiveness from God and from each other, and pray for each other (James 5:16). Following the words of James, ministers often lay their hands on the sick and anoint them with oil in the name of Christ (James 5:14). When anointing the sick with oil, many African American Christians have faith that God will miraculously cure ailments and diseases. During healing services, persons have reported seeing disabled persons rise from their wheelchairs, blind persons receive their sight, deaf persons receive their hearing, and various other supernatural miracles. Yet, besides being an expression of faith in God's miraculous power to heal, the practice of anointing the sick with oil also signifies God's presence and solidarity with broken people. That is to say that this act is an assurance to hurting people that God is with them and they are included in the Christian community.

II. Because They Believed: A Family of Faith

Several years ago a married couple faced a difficult decision. The couple had conceived their sixth child. Prior to realizing that she was pregnant, the wife had taken medicine for an asthma condition that threatened the health of her unborn child. Her doctor ran tests and told the couple that it was a high risk that their child

could be born severely underweight and be mentally handicapped. The doctor advised the couple that they should consider aborting the pregnancy. The couple grappled with this news, and they decided to trust God for healing. They informed their pastor and their church about their predicament, and the pastor invited everyone in the congregation to pray for them. During the pregnancy, the mother spent many anxious days and sleepless nights shedding tears and praying to God for a healthy baby. She read the Bible for comfort and strength, and she expressed that God's words to the prophet Jeremiah inspired and renewed her faith in God's healing power: "See, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh; is anything too hard for me?" (Jeremiah 32:27).⁴

She carried the baby to full term, and the baby was born a healthy 9 pounds, 8 ounces, and twenty-three inches! The baby was listed in the local newspaper for breaking a record as the longest baby ever born in the town. A newspaper journalist nicknamed the baby, "Lil Wilt" after the renowned 7-foot-1-inch basketball star Wilton "Wilt" Chamberlain. Furthermore, instead of being mentally challenged, the baby grew to excel academically and received several academic scholarships and awards.

The couple faced with that difficult decision were my parents. I was that baby! What if my parents surrendered to fear instead of standing on their faith? What if they were not part of a faith community and were not surrounded by friends and family who prayed with them and encouraged them during their arduous time of struggle? Today **I live** knowing that my life is a product of my parents' faith in God, and the result of a believing and praying family and church community. In essence, my very existence is a consequence of the faith of others. Recognizing the healing and life-giving power of faith, I am enthusiastic to influence people who feel hopeless so that they know they are not alone, that God is with them, and that God can heal and restore them.

III. The Healing and Transforming Power of Testimonies and Support Groups

Growing up in the Church of God in Christ, I remember a time during the worship period called "Testimony Service." During this period, the worship leader gave persons in the congregation an opportunity to share a personal story of how God had influenced their lives. After beginning their testimony with the traditional opening, "I thank the Lord for saving me, sanctifying me, and filling me with the Holy Ghost," persons would proceed to discuss a particular way in which God had blessed them. For instance, a person might explain how God had delivered them

from a life-threatening illness such as cancer, protected them during a car accident that had the potential to be fatal, or helped them overcome depression.

As a youth, I often felt that testimony service was too long and boring, as I listened to story after story. I did not fully appreciate the value of listening to others' testimonies. As I have matured, I have come to understand the significance of hearing and listening to others' testimonies. Disheartened people, who hear the testimonies of others who have been healed from various ailments and delivered from despair, can be inspired to believe that God can also help them in their situation. As a minister, I have witnessed individuals' testimonies renew the hope of many people who were on the verge of giving up.

At the church I currently attend, St. John's Downtown United Methodist Church in Houston, I established a support group called the Lazarus Project. The Lazarus Project aims to help ex-offenders overcome despair, the cycle of prison, and death through offering unconditional love and support. We invite ex-offenders to come as they are, and we allow them to vent their anger, pain, and frustrations. Many newly released people who visit our program are homeless, struggle with substance abuse, and have been in and out of jail several times. They experience emotional distress and despair as their criminal backgrounds make it difficult for them to secure employment, housing, healthcare, and various forms of assistance. Besides offering hygiene items, clothing, and making various social service referrals, our time of sharing our stories and testimonies is the most significant aspect of our programming. During this time, Christian ex-offenders who have become established in the church, financially stable, and have managed to stay out of prison, share their stories.

For example, Brother Willy discusses how his addiction to drugs disrupted his relationship with his family, influenced him to spend several stints in prison, and to become homeless. He shares how his relationship with God and his utilization of drug treatment programs and other social services enabled him to overcome his addiction and to become financially and emotionally stable. He encourages other men and women who are released from prison and are battling with substance abuse and other addictions that God is with them and is willing to transform, heal, and restore them. Furthermore, he allows God to work through him to mentor and assist persons struggling to find stability in life.

Men and women like Brother Willy, who are not ashamed to tell their stories and are willing to offer their support, affect change in the attitudes of those who visit our group meetings. While many ex-offenders believe that no one really cares for

them and that they are hopeless, people like Willy demonstrate God's care and compassion; they are tangible examples and beacons of hope. Many ex-prisoners enter the room with a dejected spirit, but they leave feeling loved and believing that there is hope. Rather than giving up, they muster the faith to fight on and the courage to face adversity.⁵

Christians in recovery who are willing to share their story often do so because they recognize their dependence upon their higher power for strength. They acknowledge that if they become prideful that they can easily become entangled again in illegal drugs and alcoholism. Brother Willy expressed that he shares his testimonies with other addicts and prisoners and serves and assists them so that he can remain humble. He says that when he sees other addicts, he sees a mirror reflection of himself before his spiritual conversion.

According to the twelfth step of Alcoholic Anonymous, "The Big Book," a person who has had a "spiritual awakening" through following the steps should take the message to other addicts and continue to "practice the principles in all affairs."⁶ In essence, people in recovery should share their journey of healing and transformation with other addicts. *This sharing enables addicts to know that they are not alone and that there is hope for healing and restoration.*

IV. Making It a Memorable Learning Moment

In addition to traditional services of healing, churches should uphold the healing influence of support and recovery groups. Unfortunately, some African American Christians do not affirm twelve-step recovery programs, as they believe that they are unbiblical and that persons only need to have faith and believe in God's power to miraculously cure them of addictions. Some African American Christians testify that God took "the taste away" or that after they accepted Christ they no longer had a craving for alcohol or drugs.

While I do not dismiss that God can and has cured persons of their addictions, I've heard or read of numerous African American Christians in recovery who affirm that the twelve steps were helpful for them in their recovery.

There are also support groups for people experiencing depression, for divorcees, and for people suffering from physical ailments and disease, including HIV/AIDS, cancer, and substance abuse.

In 1991, Pastor John Baker of Saddleback Church founded a program called Celebrate Recovery. Celebrate Recovery is a program designed to help those struggling with hurts, hang-ups, and habits by showing them the loving power of Jesus Christ through the recovery process.⁷ Celebrate Recovery endorses the twelve steps and reconciles them with Christian teachings. Listed below are the recovery principles advocated by Celebrate Recovery.

Celebrate Recovery's Recovery Principles

The Road to Recovery
Based on the Beatitudes

(Step 1) Realize I'm not God; I admit that I am powerless to control my tendency to do the wrong thing and that my life is unmanageable.

"Happy are those who know that they are spiritually poor."

(Step 2) Earnestly believe that God exists, that I matter to Him and that He has the power to help me recover.

"Happy are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

(Step 3) Consciously choose to commit all my life and will to Christ's care and control.

"Happy are the meek."

(Steps 4 and 5) Openly examine and confess my faults to myself, to God, and to someone I trust.

"Happy are the pure in heart."

(Steps 6 and 7) Voluntarily submit to any and all changes God wants to make in my life and humbly ask Him to remove my character defects.

"Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires."

(Steps 8 and 9) Evaluate all my relationships. Offer forgiveness to those who have hurt me and make amends for harm I've done to others when possible, except when to do so would harm them or others.

“Happy are the merciful.”

“Happy are the peacemakers.”

(Steps 10 and 11) Reserve a time with God for self-examination, Bible reading, and prayer in order to know God and His will for my life and to gain the power to follow His will.

(Step 12) Yield myself to God to be used to bring this Good News to others, both by my example and my words.

“Happy are those who are persecuted because they do what God requires.”⁸

Today more than 700,000 people in thousands of churches throughout the world have completed Celebrate Recovery programs.⁹ As thousands of African Americans struggle with addictions, including substance abuse, this program is an excellent resource for African American churches that are seeking healing and wholeness for their parishioners and community.

V. Songs That Speak to the Moment

Nichole Nordeman’s revised version of Charlotte Elliot’s 1835 hymn “Just as I Am” expresses Christ’s willingness to accept persons in their various states of brokenness. The lyrics to this song are printed below, and the following YouTube video provides a great visual.

video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h8r0ftjCTNA>

“Just as I Am” By Nichole Nordeman

Just as I Am

by Nichole Nordeman

I wondered how to come to You,
I did not dare believe it true, that You regard the orphaned ones:
beloved daughters, worthy sons,
the broken and the barren too,
I heard I could find some rest in You.

What kind of love in injury’s place,
would leave instead the stain of grace?
So I come in sorrow and I come in shame.
I come to the cross with my pain.

Just as I am, without one plea,
but that thy blood was shed for me
and that Thou bidst me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

The pardon that I found from sin spilled out from where the nails went in.
My heart will ever more proclaim
I had not lived until that day.
And I know there is a crown for me
beyond where mortal eyes can see
and I don't nod to any man,
but offer me just as I am.

So I come rejoicing with hands held high,
and I come singing words of new life.

Just as I am, without one plea,
but that thy blood was shed for me
and that Thou bidst me come to Thee,

O Lamb of God,
O Lamb of God,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

O Lamb of God, I come.¹⁰

I was deeply moved when Bishop Robert Woodard Jr. sang this next song during worship services at Williams Temple Church of God in Christ in Houston, Texas. Bishop Woodard sang the song as he was battling cancer. As he sang, it was clear that he had faith in God's healing presence. Though he succumbed to cancer, Bishop Woodard was strengthened by his faith in God's presence during his last days and so were others who watched him as he fought a good fight and kept the faith until he transitioned.

Jesus Your Presence Makes Me Whole

by Alvin Slaughter

As we gather in his name, he said he'd be with us

When he's here
When he's here
When he's here
His presence we feel.

Oh the lame, the blind, the crippled, weep from years of pain.
When Jesus is here
When Jesus is here

In his presence you will be cleansed
You will be blessed
You will be healed.

(3x) Jesus, oh Jesus, Jesus, oh Jesus,
Jesus, oh Jesus,
Your presence makes me whole.¹¹

While one can be made whole by feeling the presence of God in one's being, this song by Pastor Hezekiah Walker emphasizes that God's presence and love is often manifest through human kindness and compassion. The song stresses that Christians need to value, love, and support each other to survive and endure the challenges and storms of life.

I Need You to Survive

by Hezekiah Walker

I need you, you need me.
We're all a part of God's body.
Stand with me, agree with me.
We're all a part of God's body.

It is his will, that every need be supplied.
You are important to me, I need you to survive.
You are important to me, I need you to survive.
(repeat 3X)

I pray for you, You pray for me.
I love you, I need you to survive.
I won't harm you with words from my mouth.
I love you, I need you to survive.

(repeat 8 X)

It is his will, that every need be supplied.
You are important to me, I need you to survive.¹²

VI. Audio Visual Aids

Shawls and Other Symbols of Care



When a person is seriously ill, depressed, or grieving, they often experience loneliness and isolation.¹³ Simply demonstrating God's unconditional love by being present with them is extremely significant. The Compassion and Care Ministry at my church delivers prayer shawls to the sick and shut in. Ministry members gather on Saturday evenings and carefully sew and knit each shawl. These are acts of care and compassion made one stitch at a time. In addition to providing physical warmth to persons in hospital rooms, which are often chilly, the prayer shawls signify God's warm and comforting presence expressed through the love of the Christian community. Members I have visited have expressed that they were grateful to receive the shawls and they have been uplifted by a pastor or a member of the Care and Compassion Ministry taking the time to visit them and pray with them.

In addition to prayer shawls, African American churches should creatively consider other meaningful symbols and gestures of compassion and kindness that can be given to hurting persons in our communities. Besides the gift of prayer and our presence, what can we physically give to persons to remind them that they are not alone, that God is with them, and that we, the family of God, are with them? Here are some suggestions that your church can use:

1. Create a two or three page booklet/pamphlet that lists all of the local and state resources available to ex-offenders. Be thorough and be sure to vet each entity before you list it to ensure that your list is up to date and helpful to ex-offenders. Be certain to include: places where people can live, obtain food, obtain free mental health services, employment services, medical services, anger management counseling, parenting classes, legal aide, and clothing.
2. Mow the lawn of a homebound person before or after you visit with them.
3. Go shopping for a person who is not physically able to shop for themselves.
4. Plant an outside or inside garden for a senior or disabled person who likes vegetables. Be sure that the garden needs only minimal upkeep. Provide the person with a book on inside or outside gardening.
5. Have the children or youth of your church design “get well” cards or “we miss you” cards for people who are hospitalized, in nursing homes, or homebound.
6. Have the youth of your church develop a video for mothers exiting prison to encourage the ex-offenders to stay strong and committed to staying out of prison. Include images of mothers and children, happy families, and women who have overcome, and set the video to music. Make the videos available to support groups at your church and other churches in your community that have support groups.
7. Prepare packets (CDs or DVDs) of sermons (at least 3) on thriving and walking by faith. The packets should include a note from the pastor of your church and the ministry providing the gift. These can be given to persons in support groups and to those in hospitals, prisons, and nursing homes.

Notes

1. Online location: <http://www.tulipstreet.org/site/?p=89>
2. Copeland, Mary Shawn. Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010. pp. 81–82.
3. Rasmus, Rudy. TOUCH: Pressing Against the Wounds of a Broken World. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2008.

4. All Scripture citations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.
5. Online location: <http://stjohnspathoffreedom.org/Reentrynetworkmeeting.aspx>
6. Online location: <http://www.aa.org/bbonline/>
7. Online location: <http://www.celebraterecovery.com/>
8. Ibid.
9. Online location: http://www.celebraterecovery.com/?page_id=1919
10. Online location: <http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/amazinggrace/justasiam.htm>; Charlotte Elliot's original version of this song is on the Cyberhymnal: <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/j/u/justasam.htm>.
11. Slaughter, Alvin. "Jesus Your Presence Makes Me Whole." Location: Benny Hinn: Healing, Experience God's Power in Worship. New York, NY: Sony, 1998.
12. Walker, Hezekiah. "I Need You to Survive." Online location: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LUUHPDUsLJ0>; <http://www.lyricstime.com/hezekiah-walker-i-need-you-to-survive-lyrics.html>.
13. Stevenson-Moessner, Jeane. A Primer in Pastoral Care: Creative Pastoral Care and Counseling Series. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, Press, 2005. p. 75.