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Recovering Liturgies of Healing and Reconciliation

LITURGIES OF HEALING

This chapter explores an area of liturgical ministry that the churches have often neglected: liturgies of healing. In Luke 9:1–2, Jesus sent the disciples out to preach God’s reign and to heal: “Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.” Why has the church taken so seriously the apostolic mission of proclaiming God’s kin-dom while neglecting in liturgy the mission of caring for those who are sick or in pain?

The God of Hebrew Scripture heals (Ps. 103:1–4). Healing was central to Jesus’ ministry. Recall in the Gospel of Mark how Jesus heals a man whose friends lowered him through a roof (Mark 2:1–12). Jesus heals a woman with a ceaseless flow of blood and the dying child of a synagogue leader (Mark 5:21–43). Mark says that the twelve “cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them” (Mark 6:13). Remember how Jesus frees Mary Magdalene from demons and then entrusts her with the ministry of the gospel (Luke 8:1–3) and how he heals ten lepers, only one of whom, a Samaritan, returns to give thanks (Luke 17:11–19). In John’s Gospel (5:1–18), Jesus meets a man who has waited many years by a healing pool and challenges him to take up his pallet and walk—and he does! Later, Jesus raises his friend Lazarus from the dead (John 11:17–53). Matthew, too,

reports how “Jesus went throughout Galilee, . . . proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people” (Matt. 4:23). When John the Baptist sends his disciples to ask if Jesus is “the one who is to come,” Jesus answers, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (Matt. 11:4–5); healing is an unmistakable sign of God’s promised one. The story of Jesus healing a great diversity of men, women, and children in Judea and beyond is so central that John Dominic Crossan says that the two most certain aspects of Jesus’ ministry are his open table fellowship and his acts of healing.¹

Jesus also commissions his disciples to heal. In Acts, Luke tells the story of how the apostles continued the ministry of healing. In the name of Jesus, Peter tells a man who has not been able to walk since his birth to stand up—and he does, “walking and leaping and praising God” (Acts 3:1–10). Later, Peter calls Dorcas, a disciple in the church at Joppa, to get up from her bed of death (Acts 9:36–43). And she does. Mark, too, attests that the disciples anoint people and cure the sick (Mark 6:13//Luke 9:6). In fact, the version of the Great Commission in the longer ending of Mark says that those who believe “will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover” (Mark 16:18b). We see the practice of early Christians ministering to the sick and anointing them with oil in James 5:13–15:

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.

Such practices continued in the early church, as witnessed by Justin Martyr, Origen, Irenaeus, and Cyprian.² Tertullian exclaimed, “How many [people] of rank (to say nothing of the common people) have been delivered from demons and healed of diseases!” He wrote that even the father of the emperor Antonine was grateful to the Christian Proculus, who had “cured him from anointing.”³ The *Apostolic Tradition* speaks of the blessing of oils, prayer, and anointing by elders.⁴ Serapion of Thmuis, who lived in Lower Egypt in the fourth century, includes prayers and blessings that ask for healing of the sick in his *Euchology* (a collection of prayers). One reads:

Lord, God of mercies,
deign to stretch out your hands:
in your kindness, heal all the sick,
in your kindness, make them worthy of health,
deliver them from their present sickness;
in the name of your only-begotten Son, grant them recovery;
let this holy name be their remedy
for health and restoration.
Through him, glory to you and power,
in the Holy Spirit,
now and for ever and ever.⁵

In fourth-century Cappadocia, Basil and Gregory of Nyssa spoke of healings through prayer,⁶ and anointing the sick has continued in some Orthodox churches throughout history. In the Western church, orders of healing were developed, yet seldom practiced, after the fourth century. In fifth-century Rome, Pope Innocent emphasized the bishop's blessing of oil and indicated that laity could anoint. Augustine in North Africa, who at first dismissed the power of healing in his time, later witnessed an amazing cure that changed his mind.⁷ By the seventh century, however, Gregory the Great called sickness "a discipline sent from God," something to be accepted rather than healed.⁸ Liturgies and rituals of healing were no longer a part of Christian liturgy, but they abound in stories of the saints and martyrs and their relics.⁹ Scholastic theologian Hugh of St. Victor speaks of physical and spiritual healing through anointing as late as 1141, but anointing (called "extreme unction") soon became a part of last rites in preparation for death, together with penance and last Communion (*viaticum*).¹⁰ Anointing of the sick was now a rite for the dying, not for the living.

The Protestant Reformers encouraged prayer for the sick. While at first both Luther and Calvin dismissed healing as a Christian practice, Luther later observed a physical cure through prayer and wrote a service of healing.¹¹ Calvin, while allowing that God continues to heal, rejected healing ceremonies and ridiculed the oil of anointing as "a putrid and ineffectual grease."¹² In sixteenth-century England, reformer Thomas Cranmer (original author and compiler of the Book of Common Prayer) provided a service for the visitation of the sick that included anointing, but in a later edition the anointing disappeared.¹³ A liturgical rite of healing or anointing almost disappeared from non-Roman Western churches. One exception was the Church of the Brethren (Dunkards) who recovered prayer for the sick with anointing

in the 1700s. In the United States, recovery of the ministry of healing was furthered by Pentecostal groups growing out of the Azusa Street revivals in California in 1906–1907.¹⁴ In the mid-twentieth century, the Episcopal Church in the United States, inspired by Agnes Sanford, began to sponsor services of healing and to recover the anointing of the sick. After the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Church recovered a broader theology and rite of healing, with the name “Sacrament of Anointing” or “Sacrament of Healing the Sick,” which is part of the larger complex of rites associated with pastoral care of the sick.¹⁵ While still generally associated with grave illness, the rite of anointing is now for the living, a pastoral resource to minister not only to the ill but to their family and community of faith as well.

Influenced by all these currents of renewal and led by Timothy Crouch, the Order of Saint Luke, an ecumenical order within the United Methodist Church that is dedicated to sacramental living and liturgical renewal, published a liturgy of healing in 1980. This was incorporated in the worship books of the United Church of Christ in 1986 and the United Methodist Church in 1992.¹⁶ This service includes Scripture reading, preaching or a time of witness, and the opportunity for prayer, laying on of hands, and anointing as well as intercession, thanksgiving, and Eucharist. In recent years other Christian groups around the world have offered similar liturgies.

Recovery of rites of healing is an important development in the churches of Jesus Christ today. As Jennifer Glen has written:

As Christians . . . we look to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and what we read there is good news: life is lived through death to life, and healing is its pledge. . . . In life and in Word, Christ entrusted to the Church the mandate to heal in his name wherever the Gospel is preached. Healing is not incidental but integral to the evangelical proclamation.¹⁷

Indeed, the ministry of laying on hands and praying for the sick is a part of the commission Jesus gave the church, as much as preaching the Word and breaking bread together. In a sense, the ministry of healing is nothing new to the churches of the Reformation, who have founded countless hospitals and whose pastors, chaplains, deaconesses, parish nurses, and laity faithfully care for the sick, the distressed, and the dying every day. What has often been missing in our churches is intentional communal worship with the opportunity for prayer, laying on of hands, and anointing. The liturgical ministry of the church

has often focused more on the plight of the sinner than on the need of people who are sick and wounded. Liturgies and rituals of healing in Christian worship provide opportunities to respond to human needs with God's good news, in the presence of the whole community of faith, who makes "their love for an ailing member visible."¹⁸ Now as in the days of Jesus, healing is a gift of God and one of the signs of God's reign among us.

Healing is the transformation that may occur when humans encounter God at the point of their need; as Glen writes, "Healing in the fullest Gospel sense implies a transformation of perspective within which human life and relationships take on a new meaning unbounded by death."¹⁹ Healing is the church's intentional ministry, through worship and pastoral care, of seeking God's presence with people experiencing grief, pain, suffering, and sickness. In some cases, the presence of God may bring physical cure, through prayer or medical processes. But healing is not the same as cure.²⁰ It may bring peace about memories of life's hurts or serenity in facing death. Healing may also occur through a community's change of attitude and behavior toward people with physical or emotional disabilities so all may freely worship and contribute their gifts to the human family. A congregation also does healing ministry when it challenges social injustice that harms people and communities. God is at work in many ways in life; as philosopher Alfred North Whitehead wrote, God can be conceived in the image of "a tender care that nothing be lost."²¹ The church is the body of Christ, and together we may participate in God's work of healing in worship and in many other ways.

As noted above, many Christian denominations have offered liturgies of healing and anointing. There are resistances to such services, however, that need to be considered as congregations begin to offer them. Some may protest that the healing stories of the Bible are only symbolic stories or exaggerations by prescientific people. Others, like Calvin, may say that miracles were only for the apostolic age, to show the glory of God in Jesus and give birth to the church. Perhaps the best response to such concerns is for people in a congregation who have experienced God's gifts of healing in their lives to tell their stories. Many churches have times to lift up prayer concerns, but it is important to lift up thanksgivings, too, as a witness to the way God continues to bring wholeness and hope even today. Another sort of resistance comes from those who have been hurt by individuals who promoted themselves as faith healers but were actually carrying out a

scam to make money or to promote their own agendas. One answer to this concern is to focus on communal liturgies more than individual charisms and on the prayer of the whole church more than particular leaders. Although some may have particular gifts, these gifts should not be seen as individual possessions but as part of the ministry of the whole congregation (1 Cor. 12:4–31). In any case, it is important to keep our focus on the triune God and not ourselves as the healers.

Another deep concern with the ministry of healing has come from people with disabilities and their families. Too often, well-intended people insist that a person with an easily identifiable disability go to a faith healer or service to receive the ability to see, walk, or speak. Then if the person refuses to attend the service, or if a “cure” does not happen, he or she may be accused of having too little faith or too much sin, which adds insult to the challenges life may already present. The so-called friend may never have asked what the person with a disability most desires—perhaps it is access to the choir loft or to better health care. (The story is told that a young girl who was deaf was asked if in heaven she would regain her hearing. She answered, “No, in heaven, everyone will sign.”) What we regard as a limitation may be central to how God works through someone. Like Jesus, who once asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” (Mark 10:46–52), friends may best offer heaping portions of respect, listening, and compassionate action in response to the person’s actual desires and needs. A congregation must become sensitized to the voices and concerns of people with disabilities before even contemplating a service of healing, in order to avoid hurtful situations.²²

This discussion of resistance to healing ministries begs the question of how God responds to prayer. A great deal of humility is needed in what we claim for healing ministry and how we explain what does and does not happen. God’s mysterious acts of healing do not depend on the holiness of the recipient or the effectiveness or power of the human minister. Most of us have experienced someone dying after we have fervently prayed they would live. Some of us have experienced someone’s recovery when the doctor says there is no hope but the community prays anyway. It is not likely to help a grieving parent to explain that “God needed another angel,” but we can witness to the steadfast love of God both in life and in death. We cannot explain why either outcome happens, and yet we can faithfully pray, knowing that God’s love encompasses all and that some sort of healing always happens when we meet God at the points of our deepest needs.

A LITURGICAL THEOLOGY OF HEALING

Let us, then, consider a liturgical theology of healing—a theology grounded in the actual acts and elements of the liturgy.

The central element of a service of healing is prayer with the confidence that God desires what is good for our lives and is more willing to give us good things than we know how to ask (see Luke 11:9–13). Yet our asking is important—as Jesus’ question “What do you want me to do for you?” implies, God knows what we need more fully than we do, but naming our need is often the first movement toward transformation. In the naming we acknowledge how it is with us, soul and body, and we acknowledge that we are in need of the working of God in our lives. Naming a particular need (for ourselves, our loved ones, or the world) is not possible in every situation. Intuitive ministers led by the Spirit sometimes know how to pray accurately for those whose needs are unspoken. Ideally, though, there should be an opportunity for naming one’s need to at least one person. Hearing a prayer for our particular need can help us be open to God’s gifts. The prayer minister serves as a representative of the body of Christ as well, helping us to know that our concerns are held in community. Yet people should have the freedom to name their need or to keep silent and to ask for prayer for either themselves or others.

Often prayer in a healing service is accompanied by the laying on of hands, which is an embodied invocation (epiclesis) of the Holy Spirit to work within and among us. Laying on of hands is common in both Testaments of the Bible, as an act of commissioning and an act of healing. Often the person being prayed for kneels or is seated, while the person praying puts both hands on the other’s head. Or, when people are coming forward in a line to receive prayer, both persons can face one another, with the one praying lightly holding the temples of the other. Laying on of hands can be understood in a more general way as a light and gentle touch on the shoulders or hand or an arm around another person’s shoulder. Of course, while careful and caring touch is helpful to many people, for others it has associations with harmful touch, so there should always be permission for participants to receive prayer and perhaps anointing without the laying on of hands.

Anointing (with olive oil or another plant oil, such as coconut oil in the Philippines) is another element of healing services. Like laying on of hands, it is a sign of the Holy Spirit’s work within us, and in Scripture it sometimes refers to the empowerment of rulers or prophets. In their

original languages, “Christ” in Greek and “Messiah” in Hebrew mean “anointed one,” so as Christians we, too, are the “anointed.” Anointing also embodies our prayers and openness to the Spirit, and this can be a powerful sign of healing even for those not accustomed to anointing. Anointing is often done in the sign of the cross to signify Christians’ baptismal union with Christ.²³ A brief formula may accompany the anointing, such as “I anoint you in the name of the Holy Trinity,” “You are anointed in the name of the Holy Trinity,” or “The Holy Spirit work within you, make you whole, and give you peace.” Before the time of prayer, laying on of hands, and anointing, there may be a blessing of the oil, such as the following:

Holy Source of life and healing,
 we give you thanks for the gift of oil,
 sign of your Spirit’s power within and among us.
 We thank you for Jesus, your anointed one,
 who healed the sick, raised the dead,
 brought good news to the poor,
 and proclaimed the year of your favor.
 Anoint us now by your grace,
 that we may receive the healing and peace you intend for us,
 and so be renewed to be your people in the world:
 through Jesus Christ we pray. **Amen.**²⁴

While prayers over the oil sometimes emphasize its healing properties, this one emphasizes the work of God as Source, Christ, and Spirit in life and liturgy as the source of healing.

Prayer, laying on of hands, and anointing are distinctive parts of healing services, but other elements are also essential. Certainly the reading of Scripture and the preaching of the gospel should be included. Churches that have healing liturgy occasionally during Sunday worship might particularly do so on a day when lectionary texts speak of healing; in any case, preachers should not ignore the healing dimensions of texts. Once I heard a lectionary-based sermon on Luke 9:1–2, a text in which Jesus tells the disciples to go out and preach and heal. Much was said about preaching and witnessing to faith, but not one word was spoken about Jesus’ commission to heal. Churches that do not follow the lectionary might well use stories of Jesus healing, as well as James 5:13–16.

Intercession is another important part of a service of healing. Of course we do intercede for those who come for prayer, laying on of

hands, or anointing, but it is good to expand intercessory prayer to the whole community and larger world as a witness to God's care for all creation. *Tongsung kido* would also be appropriate for prayer for oneself and others in congregations familiar with this tradition from Korea and other parts of Asia.²⁵

Healing liturgies often include confession. Sometimes guilt or broken relationships may lead to physical, spiritual, and emotional problems. In that case, confession, assurance of God's grace, and the resolve to make amends and to rebuild relationships may be helpful. Even in the absence of a deeply troubled conscience, confession can open the way to receiving both the grace of God's forgiveness and the grace of God's healing. In services focused on specific needs, prayers of confession should be used with care, though of course all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). People with disabilities, people living with AIDS, and people who are victims of sexual abuse by a parent or authority figure are sometimes blamed unfairly—or blame themselves—for their condition. Prayers of confession in these contexts must be worded very carefully and in some cases could be eliminated entirely. I wrote this act of awareness to express the reality that we all bear both sin and woundedness:

Call to awareness: As we draw near to the fountain of grace,
let us lay down burdens of hurt and guilt
that we may receive with open hands
the gifts God intends for us.

Unison prayer of awareness: We lay down our need before you,
holy God of compassion and grace,
trusting in your great love for us and for all creation.
We bear wounds, and we ourselves have wounded others.
We open ourselves to the work of your Spirit among us
to free us from all that is not of you
and to recreate us in your image.

Praise and thanksgiving, honor and blessing be to you,
divine Fount of healing and love,
through your Word of grace made flesh,
and your Spirit of holiness and power. Amen.

Assurance of God's Love: Hear the good news:
Nothing in all creation,
neither what we do nor what has been done to us,
can separate us from the love of God made known in Jesus Christ
and poured out on the church through the Spirit.
Thanks be to God!²⁶

Acknowledging our sin, our woundedness, and our need for God's grace may be an important part of a service of healing.

Finally, thanksgiving to God is essential. Indeed, a time of witness and thanksgiving could replace preaching. People could be invited to witness to what God has already done for them and what God will do as the prayers of the saints continue. It is right to give thanks to God, and the attitude of gratitude itself brings wholeness. It is more than appropriate to celebrate Eucharist as the consummate act of thanksgiving to God.

A spirit of gentleness and freedom should surround the service, so that people are able to participate as they are comfortable, coming for prayer or staying in their seats, and asking prayers for themselves or others. The invitation should clearly and briefly describe what is offered. Music can help create this gentle climate, allowing people in their seats to pray through song while others move toward stations or teams for prayer, laying on of hands, and anointing. The environment for worship also can contribute to creating an appropriate mood for the service, through the use of color, symbol, and live plants as a reminder of new life and growth.

BEGINNING A LOCAL CHURCH MINISTRY OF HEALING

Leaders who seek to expand a congregation's ministry of healing through a portion of the Sunday service or in special services should prepare carefully, especially in traditions in which laypeople take part in the praying, anointing, and laying on of hands.²⁷ In many congregations, the first step might be an adult education series focused on learning to pray aloud for others; this would include both guidelines and actual experience of praying for one another. An education series focused on healing could follow, studying the Gospel stories, discussing the group's associations and experiences with healing, and learning about practices of prayer and healing liturgies. If intercessory prayer groups already exist, they may be glad to expand their ministry through liturgy. If not, the person in the church most interested in the healing service can gather a group for study and preparation. Although this may not necessarily be an ordained person, it is important that clergy staff be involved, supportive, and aware of what is happening. It can be helpful to visit services in other churches to learn what they are doing and to go to workshops or conferences on healing if possible.

Avery Brooke, an Episcopal laywoman, describes the process of developing the ministry in her congregation in her book *Healing in the Landscape of Prayer*. She advocates an intensive training process (at least one year) that educates people about intercessory prayer and gives them opportunity to lay on hands and pray for one another. Such a program can build a ministry not dependent on the enthusiasm of one person for its continued existence, as well as help to avoid the negative experiences in healing ministry described above.²⁸ Brooke recommends that those who take part in this ministry be carefully chosen and prepared, rather than being volunteers. Churches that already have ministries of prayer, intercession, and lay pastoral ministry may not need to provide such intensive preparation, but supporting those who will pray, anoint, and lay on hands is crucial to the effectiveness of the services.

People who will be laying on hands, praying, or anointing in services of worship should exhibit love, compassion, and appreciation of the complexity of human needs for healing, as well as be capable of keeping what they hear in confidence. They should be able to listen well to the concerns people express and to respond in prayer in a way appropriate both to the person's specific need and to the congregation's styles of prayer (extemporaneous, from a prayer book, or prepared ahead). They should be persons of prayer.²⁹

Those who pray for others in worship should have a sound theology, recognizing that God is the Healer, with confidence that God will bring grace to our human need. They should be humble about what they claim or promise, with no tendency toward manipulation or attempts to coerce results. James Wagner, a United Methodist leader in the move toward recovery of healing prayer and liturgy, sums it up well when he says that "all those leading in the healing ministry must be open, compassionate, forgiving channels of God's redeeming and healing love"—not engaged in the ministry for financial gain or ego.³⁰ Most congregations will have a few people who have all these characteristics and who will appreciate this opportunity for ministry, if they receive appropriate support and preparation.

After some education has been done and leaders have been identified and prepared, the church should consider what would be the best form of healing ritual in their context. The most common practice is either to have a healing service outside Sunday worship once a month or to integrate a time of healing into the Sunday service. Some churches offer anointing and prayer every Sunday to people as they return to their seats after receiving Communion. Many African American churches provide

individual prayer and anointing at the altar rail in their regular time of intercession. A few churches have a short weekly service of Eucharist and healing; for example, an Episcopal church in downtown Chicago has a service each Wednesday in late afternoon when commuters are leaving work. Some churches have a special service of healing once a year, perhaps during Lent; others offer “Blue Sunday” services during Advent for those who feel grief or loneliness during times of Christmas celebration. Many other patterns exist. Since healing ministry is at the center of some groups, such as Pentecostal, Christian Science, and Unity churches, healing may take a much greater part in their worship than in the examples just described. Churches can offer liturgical healing ministry in a way that best fits their situation.

The order of worship for an entire service dedicated to healing will also vary by denomination and context. It may be best to build on the regular Sunday order, especially when introducing services of healing for the first time. Or a church may draw on a service of healing in its denomination’s worship book. Here is a typical order:

- Greeting and sentences related to healing (often Jas. 5:13–16)
- Hymn
- Act of confession (call, silence, unison confession, assurance of pardon)
- Reading of Scripture
- Sermon and/or time of witness
- Prayers of intercession and the Lord’s Prayer
- Invitation to anointing and the laying on of hands
- Prayer over the oil
- Anointing
- Laying on of hands
- Eucharist or prayer of thanksgiving
- Hymn
- Benediction

Hymns could also be sung during anointing, laying on of hands, and distribution of Communion.

Let all steps in the process—dreaming, planning, ordering, and leading—be bathed in prayer, knowing that, through the love of Christ in

the church, God is able to do far more than we ask or imagine (Eph. 3:14–21).

LITURGIES OF RECONCILIATION

The church's ministry of reconciliation is crucial in our day, though it involves much thought and difficult work to find common ground between people and seek holy ground where God's grace can make all things new. Liturgies of reconciliation—the church's ancient ministry of addressing sin and forgiveness, woundedness and healing through worship and ritual—can be part of this important work.

The ministry Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 5:17–18 is at the heart of Christian mission to the world: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to [Godself] through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation." The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ bring reconciliation, so that people from diverse nations and cultures become one body. For Paul, that meant breaking down the dividing walls between Jews and Gentiles; in the North American context, it means bringing together people of many races and cultures. In many countries, Christians seek common ground with their neighbors in the wake of prejudice, disaster, civil war, and violence. Such work is difficult now, as in the first century.

But reconciliation is not just about the pressing tensions of the public life of nations and churches. It is part of the journey of the baptized toward sanctification. Paul pleads with Christians to be reconciled with God. This is already accomplished in Christ, yet it takes a lifetime to live out what it means to be a new creation. Catholic theologian Monika Hellwig has spoken of the ministry of reconciliation as "conversion therapy":³¹ the way that people in Christian community support and challenge one another in the slow process of turning toward the ways of God. Christians are to be like the small shoots of flowers pushing up through snow as winter moves into spring, a glimpse of God's kingdom that is already, not yet, in this world. Words of confession we murmur are far more than empty ritual. They are a sign of our cooperation with the labor of God to transform our own lives and the life of the world.

To undertake the ministry of reconciliation means owning up to the sin and brokenness in our lives and, as we shall see, the wounds we carry because of others' wrongdoing. It is a matter of opening our lives

to the loving Spirit of God, who changes us. As we consider this, we should avoid two common misconceptions of sin.

The first misconception is the sense that sin and grace have only to do with our relationship with God and not our relationships with the rest of creation, including our human sisters and brothers. Experiencing the love and grace of God should inspire us to act in love and grace toward others, doing no harm. Thinking of sin only in terms of our relationship with God can allow us to continue treating others in unjust, harmful, and violating ways rather than to seek God's help in reforming our lives.

The second misconception is to treat sin only as an abstract category or an inherited substance (a stain to be washed away by baptism). Sin is not only the state of our lives without grace; it has to do with concrete attitudes and actions in relationship to God and neighbor. It is the failure to live life as a Christian. As universal as human sin may be, it takes specific forms embodied in our relationships and actions in the real history of the world. The ministry of reconciliation is nothing less than a process of opening ourselves to God's Spirit at work to change our lives and communities, so that we may love as God loves.

Reconciliation with God and one another is a life-changing practice. When we look at our lives and the life of the church and world around us, we learn how urgent this ministry is. We must ask how our worship services and pastoral ministry can best enable individuals and congregations, denominations and nations, to turn toward the love and the will of God. Could it be individual confession to a priest or soul friend or spiritual director? Or would corporate confession as part of public worship be better? Should we organize face-to-face groups in which one's joys and struggles can be shared or public worship services of reconciliation? Conversion therapy can take many forms, and we must search out the best ones for our particular situation.

Reconciliation is much needed in our time. Once I was in a taxi on the way to a meeting at a Catholic conference center. Knowing I was a Christian, the taxi driver began to tell me about his struggle with alcoholism and his guilt over having been unfaithful to his wife. He explained how Alcoholics Anonymous and confession to his priest had helped him turn his life around. Students at our seminary from Chile and Liberia tell me how their family members have been imprisoned, killed, or dismembered in violent political situations, and how hard it is to forgive those who harmed their loved ones. Others from Korea tell

heartbreaking stories of losing contact with their loved ones when the United States and other countries put up barriers between people who are really one nation.

And of course, the news we hear every day is full of conflict between nations and peoples and the harm that humans do to one another. The world needs reconciliation, and sometimes our churches do, too. Given the realities of human life and the call of the gospel, how could we refuse the ministry of reconciliation done through worship and other aspects of church life?

UNDERSTANDINGS OF RECONCILIATION

Reconciliation is the ministry of restoring human relationships with God and one another. It is necessary because of human sin and woundedness. Reconciliation is a continuation of the ministry of Jesus Christ and a work of the Holy Spirit, a growth into new life in Christ with which we are marked at baptism. Reconciliation addresses human need for release from guilt, self-hatred, and destructive relationships through witnessing to and demonstrating the love and compassion of God. Theologian Peter Fink has said that through reconciliation, the church responds “to the reality of sin with the healing grace of Jesus Christ.”³²

Acts of worship intended to respond to sin and to support conversion have had a variety of names. Protestants have talked of confession and forgiveness. From medieval times the Roman Catholic Church spoke of the sacrament of penance—involving repentance, confession, absolution, and making amends. At first “penance” referred to the act of making amends; later the whole process was called “penance.” “Reconciliation,” the term used by Vatican II and by liturgical scholars of many denominations, emphasizes restoring relationships with other people, with God, and within communities. It is the ministry of undoing sin and division and moving toward wholeness and communion among peoples.³³ So understood, reconciliation is at the heart of the church’s mission as it continues the ministry of Jesus Christ. It addresses the reality of sin, brokenness, and division and responds to guilt and shame with the hope of the gospel. Through reconciliation Christians support one another in the process of turning toward God in every area of our lives. This is a challenging but absolutely necessary ministry.

THE HISTORY OF RECONCILIATION

As Jesus ministered in Galilee, he paid much attention to forgiveness of sin and conversion to new life—consider Matthew the tax collector and the parable of the Prodigal Son. Jesus also challenged people to learn to forgive one another, as God had forgiven them, and to deal with conflicts face to face. In Matthew 5:23–26 he asks disciples to make peace with anyone who “has something against” them before offering their gift to God: “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”

Through his death Jesus demonstrated the power of love in the face of human hatred and violence, and through his resurrection he showed that God’s love is greater than death. In all this he laid the foundation for the church’s ministry of reconciliation. Baptism was the starting point. Both the baptism of John and the baptisms described in the book of Acts grew from repentance and led to new life, and this continued in the first centuries of the church.

The Apostolic Tradition recommends spending three years preparing for baptism. The author names a long list of professions (such as acting in plays or serving in the military) that people must give up to be baptized.³⁴ Baptismal catechesis focused more on examining and changing lives than on learning doctrine or understanding sacraments.

In those early years, churches believed that they must excommunicate those who had been baptized but whose lives were deemed no longer worthy of Christ due to serious sins such as heresy or murder that threatened the unity of the church. What is now called “reconciliation” began as a way to call people back to live as faithful Christians “or at least not obscure the community’s holiness,”³⁵ a particular concern in times of persecution when some denied their faith. The penitents, often wearing sackcloth and ashes, did penance (including fasting and almsgiving) and were seated separately from other worshippers. They were excused with the catechumens at the end of the liturgy of the Word.³⁶ They were reunited with the church at a public rite in which the bishop restored to communion those who were now judged ready to live a righteous Christian life. At first a person would receive reconciliation only once in a lifetime. No wonder many fourth-century Christians waited to be baptized or reconciled on their deathbeds.

From the fifth to the ninth centuries, Christians came to accept the reality of postbaptismal sin. Lent became a time to examine one's life, in solidarity with the catechumens and the penitents who were being restored to communion on Easter. By the tenth century, all the faithful were expected to enter into a time of penance during Lent; the receiving of ashes on their foreheads marked the beginning of this penitential season.

From the seventh to the twelfth centuries, a form of spirituality that included private confession developed in the Celtic churches and spread elsewhere. It emphasized self-examination of one's faults and wrong actions and led to confession, penance, and absolution. "Penance" was a spiritual discipline or act to mend one's fault. It was completed before forgiveness was announced. At first a "soul friend," not necessarily a priest, could hear the confession. The process could be mutual: friends could hear one another's confessions.

Gradually it became more common to confess to a priest. The ritual came to focus on listing sins and paying a penalty appropriate to the seriousness of the sin, rather than developing self-awareness and growing in holiness. Over time, the idea arose that the saints and Christ have a surplus of merits that could be applied to the sins of others through celebration of masses in the name of the dead, paid for by their relatives.

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries saw further development of the sacrament of penance. In 1215 the Lateran Council named penance as a sacrament and codified its structure, focusing on confessing sins to a priest who would announce absolution. It became a juridical (legal) matter, similar to laws in which speeding brings a specified fine depending on how fast you were going. At first, private confession was voluntary; later it was required as preparation for mass. This whole system of addressing sin was the spark that lit the flame of the Reformation.

Given the way penance had developed, the Reformers distrusted private confession. Luther allowed private and corporate confession. While Calvin felt that as a part of pastoral care, ministers should admonish or even excommunicate members who were doing wrong, he did not see confession as a sacrament, liturgy, or requirement. Calvinist traditions sometimes had a separate service of preparation for the Lord's Supper that focused on examining whether one had observed the Ten Commandments. Archbishop Thomas Cranmer,

leader of the Reformation in England, included corporate prayers of confession, with absolution, in the order for Holy Communion in the Book of Common Prayer; this practice has continued to the present in Anglican and Methodist traditions. Meanwhile, the Catholic Council of Trent (1545–1563) responded to Calvin and Luther by affirming penance and codifying its structure: contrition, confession, absolution, and satisfaction (“the good works assigned by the confessor and carried out by the penitent as a way of restoring the order disturbed by sin and as a remedy for sin”³⁷).

In the revivals and awakenings of the nineteenth-century United States, evangelical preaching sought to convict people inwardly of their sins so that they would commit their lives to Christ—this was their liturgy of reconciliation. This tradition has continued in many churches in the United States and in the countries where Christianity arrived through the world mission movement of the nineteenth century. Some Protestant churches (such as United Methodist, Presbyterian, and United Church of Christ) began to use prayers of confession at the beginning of Sunday worship (and not, for United Methodists, only as part of the Communion service) in the mid-twentieth century. Emerging understandings draw on early church models emphasizing restored relationships with God and others through confession, forgiveness, and the changing of life and relationships.

In the twentieth century, Roman Catholic understandings of penance were also recovering the early church linkage with restored relationships. New rites after the Second Vatican Council included communal confession with opportunity for individual confession, a liturgy of reconciliation of an individual, a liturgy of general confession and absolution, and a penitential service without individual confession or absolution. At first people were encouraged to confess their sin together in liturgy, but soon the church began again to require that people name specific sins privately to a priest. The focus of these rites was on individual sin, but some called for liturgies for reconciling groups, establishing justice, or resolving conflict.³⁸ A lively dialogue continues, even as churches develop ways to combine individual and corporate reconciliation.

There is a growing interest in the ministry of reconciliation in Christian worship, with churches searching for the best way to undertake this age-old ministry of the body of Christ. We now turn to some of the approaches churches have been taking.

THE OTHER SIDE OF RECONCILIATION

In *The Wounded Heart of God*, one of the most important theological treatises of the twentieth century, Korean American theologian Andrew Sung Park has described flaws in the Christian understanding of sin, repentance, and forgiveness.³⁹ Park, who is a professor at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, argues that traditional understandings have all but exclusively focused on the sinner and the sinner's relationship with God. Confessing sin, proclaiming God's forgiveness, and calling sinners to new life is an appropriate concern of Christian theology and liturgy, but this is only part of the story.

Park calls on the church and its liturgies also to address the *han* of those harmed by others' sins and unjust acts. *Han* is a Korean word for profound feelings of frustrated hope, sadness, and resentment in the aftermath of victimization and violence; it is experienced both individually and communally. Park believes that theology and liturgy should contribute to resolving *han*, enabling Christians to name their experiences of *han*, grow in self-awareness, and engage in constructive action. Liturgies should reveal the wounded heart of God empathizing with those who suffer, for "Jesus suffered not only to remit sinners' transgressions but also to heal victims' pain."⁴⁰

Park also criticizes the theology of original sin to the extent that it makes us responsible for what we did not do, rather than naming and seeking to change our wrongdoings that harm our neighbors. He distinguishes guilt (responsibility for one's actions) from shame (generalized lack of self-esteem growing out of being mistreated or devalued by others). He names the danger of proclaiming forgiveness without changing the relationship between offender and victim. "The guilt of the oppressor is not a matter to be resolved through the unilateral proclamation of forgiveness and absolution by a priest or pastor, without regard for their victims."⁴¹ Park says that liturgies that reconcile the sinner and heal the suffering of those with *han* must be complemented by the ongoing process of ending injustice and violation and restructuring society so that it is just, equitable, and ecologically sound.

Congregational liturgies of healing are an important way to address suffering and *han*. Like reconciliation, healing is already a significant part of many Christian worship services, but full liturgies of healing, whether general or focused on addressing such experiences as sexual

abuse or job loss, can also witness to the love and grace of God toward those who suffer.

Liturgies of lament. Taking Andrew Sung Park's critiques seriously, we would make more room for lament in worship—the lament of Rachel for her children who are no more (Jer. 31:15), the lament of people who have been abused by those whom they trusted, the lament of people in the rubble of war or terrorism, the lament of those who have lost their employment or their hopes for the future. We have a strong model for the lament of individuals and communities in the Psalms and the writings of Jeremiah.

Psalm 13 concisely expresses key themes of lament. First, the psalmist pleads for God's attention, accusing God of neglect:

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?

The psalmist describes the situation and the distress it is causing:

How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

The psalmist asks for help:

Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed";
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

The psalmist expresses hope and trust in God, based on God's past faithfulness:

But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing to the LORD,
who has dealt bountifully with me.
(*NRSV, alt.*)

Biblical lament gives us hints of how we may incorporate lament in worship: by naming lamentable situations honestly and poignantly, asking for God's help, evoking trust in the God of healing and justice, and complaining if God seems to be silent or unconcerned.

In his excellent book *Liturgies of Lament*, J. Frank Henderson names situations in which lament may be incorporated in worship and provides liturgies for various occasions.⁴² On Yom HaShoah, the day when our Jewish sisters and brothers remember the Holocaust, we may take part in litanies of lament, which are also appropriate on August 6 and 9, remembering the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, and on September 11, the date in 2001 when airplanes were flown into the World Trade Center buildings in New York and the Pentagon. New litanies may be composed when disaster or destruction strike a community or a nation, or when we are reeling from reports of sexual abuse of children or violence against elders. Although some may argue that worship should always be upbeat and positive, naming our lament can lead us toward healing and action that lead to more abundant living and praise.

It is important for the church to expand its ministry and liturgy to include both those who have sinned and those who have been sinned against.

OCCASIONS FOR RECONCILIATION

Reconciliation through the Sunday Word and Table service. The ministry of reconciliation is an important aspect of any Christian worship service. Preaching that lays the gospel before us, in its grace and in its challenge, seeks to reconcile us to God and one another. The passing of the peace is much more than a time of greeting. It has its origin in the ministry of reconciliation, as an opportunity for Christians who have been estranged to reconcile with one another; therefore it is done following the confession and pardon and before the Great Thanksgiving. The Prayer of Jesus, with the words “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us” (from Matt. 6:12), is also an act of reconciliation, as is the Eucharist, which renews the church in the presence of the risen Christ. During the prayers of the people or pastoral prayer we can pray for our enemies. Responding to the gospel through baptism is a matter of forgiveness, grace, and union with Christ and the church, and often the liturgy includes renunciation of sin and turning toward Christ. All these aspects of ordinary Sunday worship take part in the ministry of reconciliation.

The prayer of confession. We turn now to aspects of worship that focus on reconciliation, beginning with prayers of confession. Prayers

of confession are part of a larger structure that moves through a call to confession to a unison prayer, with a time of silence for individual reflection before or after the prayer. An expression of God's forgiveness follows, then a response of praise and thanksgiving. A charge to turn to lives of love, justice, and reconciliation appropriately follows the expression of forgiveness.⁴³ Passing of the peace may follow as an act of reconciliation before bringing the gifts of bread and cup to the table.⁴⁴

The prayer of confession itself has a classic structure. It begins by addressing God as full of grace or describing God based on the Scripture text for the day. Then the congregation acknowledges its sin and brokenness, with verbs such as "confess," "admit," or "acknowledge." This may be general, as in the *Book of Common Prayer*: "We confess that we have sinned against you . . . by what we have done and by what we have left undone."⁴⁵ Or it may be specific, based on the texts and themes for the day; in either case, it should be general enough that all or most worshipers can pray it honestly. There is a request for forgiveness and transformation, and finally either a Trinitarian ascription to God or more simply "through the grace of Jesus Christ."⁴⁶

Occasional services. Ash Wednesday services often have a particular focus on reconciliation, as we "confront our own mortality and confess our sin before God in the community of faith."⁴⁷ In keeping with its origin as the beginning of the Lenten fast in preparation for baptism or reconciliation, the service calls for repentance and openness to new life. The United Methodist order includes an invitation to keep a holy Lent "by self-examination and repentance; by prayer and fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's word."⁴⁸ After that ashes are imposed, followed by praying Psalm 51 as a prayer of confession. The pastor then prays that God will "accept your repentance, forgive your sins, and restore you by the Holy Spirit to newness of life."⁴⁹ Then the peace is passed.

The Calvinist tradition of holding a service of reconciliation in the days before celebrating the Lord's Supper is continued in the 1982 *Book of Worship: United Church of Christ* through a full service of reconciliation to be used "in preparation for Holy Communion" or on other occasions.⁵⁰ The service includes an examination of conscience with a litany in which a leader reads each of the Ten Commandments. The congregation responds, "God, have mercy on us and guide us in your way." Then the leader reads the Great Commandment to love God and neighbor, followed by a litany based on the Beatitudes. Prayer, Scripture lesson, and sermon follow, then a call to confession, a prayer

of confession, and words of assurance. The congregation is asked to affirm their belief that God forgives and the Spirit empowers them to do good and resist evil.

The United Church of Christ *Book of Worship* includes another service it calls penitential in nature, “Order for Recognition of the End of a Marriage.”⁵¹ The spouses may each acknowledge responsibility for their separation and give thanks for the gifts of the marriage. Then, together with family and friends who have come to show their love and support, they confess their sins. They recognize the end of their marriage and state their wishes for one another’s well-being. If there are children, they commit themselves to work together carefully in caring for them.

The reconciliation of individuals may also take place in small-group settings that include prayer and worship. The Methodist tradition of Christian conferencing (now called covenant groups) features reflection on one’s life as group members support one another in growing toward holiness. Monika Hellwig speaks of “kitchen table confession,”⁵² when good friends share their struggles in a supportive and challenging environment that leads to insight and growth. Many churches host Alcoholics Anonymous groups, in which people move through a process of self-awareness, confession, and making amends, calling on their “Higher Power” for help.⁵³ All these may be fruitful means of individual reconciliation and transformation by God.

Liturgies of reconciliation within a congregation. Worship can also provide opportunities for members of a congregation to be reconciled. For example, I was serving as interim pastor at a church that was in conflict because the congregation had voted to ask their previous pastor to leave. About a year later, I provided a liturgy of reconciliation giving the people an opportunity to name their need to forgive and to ask forgiveness. (See appendix 4.) An African Methodist Episcopal church in Massachusetts had a service once a year in which members would move around the sanctuary speaking to persons with whom they had been in conflict in the past year and reconciling with them. Taking the time and having the courage to provide such simple acts of worship may help congregations reconcile.

Published liturgies for reconciliation within a congregation are rare, perhaps because they would have to address particular histories and be sensitive to the present relationships among the groups. In the book *Alternative Futures for Worship*, Denis J. Woods explores the development of liturgies for churches and communities experiencing conflict

and division and provides some model services.⁵⁴ Some conflicts may be easy to resolve, but when power imbalances or ethical differences exist, it may be more difficult. Whatever the source of tension, honest naming of differences in opinions, power, and values is important. So is learning to speak the truth and listen in love. Leaders can assess when a liturgy might mark progress and prepare the congregation for next steps. Woods believes that worship services, planned and timed carefully, could help churches and other groups move from competition to cooperation and from blame to responsibility to build a new future together. Such liturgies could help congregations recognize their common faith in Christ and become more open to the Spirit of God. Similarly, Eric Law, a Chinese-American Episcopal priest, devotes his ministry to helping churches build bridges among diverse members. In his book *Sacred Acts, Holy Change*, Law describes a process through which churches surround all their meetings with liturgy and prayer and thus learn and change together, led by God's Spirit.⁵⁵ In a time of much division within churches, the ministry of reconciliation through worship may be helpful.

Liturgies of reconciliation of peoples and nations. History has rarely seen a liturgy of reconciliation and healing on the scale of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa after the end of apartheid rule. This process was conceived by the leaders of the new South Africa, particularly Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, to make it possible for the nation to go forward successfully after the violent regime of apartheid had ended. Although many understandably desired to have their oppressors punished severely, Mandela and Tutu took a different path, which required evildoers simply to tell the truth, with the whole world listening, in the presence of those whose families had been devastated.⁵⁶ People had to tell the stories of atrocities they had committed and show families where the graves of their murdered relatives were located. If they did these things, they were not prosecuted for their crimes. Although not all in the country agreed with this process, it allowed the country to go forward with much less violence in its new life as a nation of many colors and many stories.⁵⁷

The whole process was liturgical, led by the archbishop in his full Episcopal robes. Each day's deliberations began with prayer. Although perpetrators were not forced to apologize, nor were victims forced to forgive, much forthright confession, forgiveness, weeping, and healing happened. South Africa has shown the world what God can do through people who take the ministry of reconciliation seriously.

Liturgies of reconciliation have been part of efforts by the Anglican Church of Canada and the United Church of Canada as they address atrocities against the First Nations people, the first inhabitants of the land, from conquest and murder to mistreating children in church boarding schools. In one event, the presiding bishop of the Anglican Church made a formal apology to First Nations members, who received his apology. The church has continued to devote attention and resources to justice for and ministry by First Nations people and labored with others to ensure that the government of Canada would institute a Truth and Reconciliation process such as that in South Africa. The United Church of Canada has been involved in similar efforts.⁵⁸

Another interesting public use of liturgy took place in April 2000, when the Presbytery of Pyongyang in North Korea repented its sin of excommunicating Pastor Ju Gi-Cheul. During the Japanese occupation of Korea, citizens were required to take part in Shinto worship, but Ju refused to participate, at the cost of imprisonment and eventually his life. Because the presbytery had advised its pastors and members to cooperate with Shinto worship, it excommunicated Pastor Ju for refusing to do so. In 2006 the presbytery made a statement repenting its “failure to keep the conscience of faith and its participation in Shinto worship under imperialist Japan and the dismissal of Pastor Ju Gi-Cheul who kept his faith against Shinto. We are truly sorry and apologize for the sin of our Presbytery.”⁵⁹ Ju’s pastoral position in the presbytery was posthumously restored. More recently the presbytery held a service of reconciliation, inviting Ju’s grandson, Seung Joong Joo, and Ju’s brother. Seung Joong Joo has witnessed to the peace and reconciliation he experienced as a result of these actions.⁶⁰

Rituals and liturgies can make a difference to the public life of the world, even when we are working across faiths and traditions. For example, after the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, law-abiding citizens of Arab descent were being harassed in a Chicago neighborhood. Local congregations helped to organize a vigil in the park expressing support of their Arab neighbors. Such witness is a part of the ministry of reconciliation we share in Christ.

RECONCILING PERSONS AND PEOPLES

The path to reconciliation is a long and winding trail with rugged mountains to climb, along with beautiful meadows full of mountain

flowers. The difference between this road and a backpacking trip is that we may not reach the destination in our lifetimes. But God is with us and guides us one step at a time and gives us hope, no matter what we read in the newspapers. Our task is to become reconciling persons and communities as we each live “in the perpetual recommencement of [one] who is never discouraged because always forgiven”⁶¹ and who is learning the difficult work of forgiving others as we are forgiven. Ours is the ministry, empowered by the Spirit, of creating liturgies that offer the grace of God in the midst of human sin, of hurt and *han*, of conflicts in churches and cities and nations. Developing new theological understandings and liturgical practices to address this world’s suffering with the healing that Christ offers is the work of several lifetimes. Thanks be to God that many churches and Christians are exploring these issues today.