

Welcome to the Book of Common Prayer

Ministration to the Sick and Dying

As mentioned last week, “Pastoral Offices” is the title of a section of the BCP (407-511) containing rites for occasions in the lives of individual Christians. The pastoral offices are geared to the pattern of individual life and are printed in roughly chronological order. The rites of the pastoral offices address both major life transitions—birth, marriage, and death—and pastoral need for reconciliation and for healing.



This week we will focus our attention on the pastoral office of Ministration to the Sick and Dying. Jesus was frequently involved in physical healing of the body. After the disciples received Jesus’ ministry of healing the sick, we read in the New Testament that the early church continued the practices of prayer for the sick, anointing, and laying on of hands. The sacramental rite in the Episcopal Church of Ministration to the Sick continues these practices of praying, anointing, and laying hands on the sick to the present time. Through those practices the ministers, and the church, participate in the healing power of God.

Some people have the mistaken notion that these practices are reserved for the time of death, a form of “last rites.” That is not true. Anointing is not reserved exclusively for the deathbed. It is for any time of illness. The BCP contains two different rites that both contain forms of Unction (anointing)—one for all the sick and one especially for the time of death.

Whether this rite takes place in a home, hospital, or church, Ministration to the Sick ordinarily contains the same three parts: ministry of the word, laying on of hands and anointing, and Holy Communion.

It may seem strange to think of death as a part of a healing rite, but that is exactly what Christians believe—that death is a kind of healing. In death we are gathered to God and restored to fullness in body, mind, and spirit. So, the BCP includes a liturgy at the time of death as part of its healing services. Here the focus is not on efforts to save a person *from* death but a way to accompany a person *through* death. Healing in these prayers is seen not as a bodily deliverance from sickness but as salvation and peace.

This sacramental rite exists as a service of healing for the community as well. As family and friends pray with and for the one who is dying, they can hopefully also experience healing and receive some measure of the peace that only Christ can give.

Taken together, the two sacramental rites we have discussed the past two weeks—Reconciliation of a Penitent and Ministration to the Sick and Dying—reflect many of the circumstances where healing might be needed. They also remind us that healing looks different for various people and in a variety of circumstances. These sacraments are moments when we

can ask God to be present and bless us, even during sickness and sin, and ultimately bring us to wholeness and health.

That completes our time together today. I hope you enjoyed our time together. Next time we will explore The Daily Office and Daily Prayer. See you then.

In Christ, Deacon John

“Welcome to the Book of Common Prayer” by Vicki K. Black, Morehouse Publishing, 2005

“Walk in Love, Episcopal Beliefs & Practices” by Scott Gunn & Melody Wilson Shobe, Forward Movement, 2018

“Praying Shapes Believing, A Theological Commentary of the Book of Common Prayer” by Leonel L. Mitchell (updated by Ruth A. Meyers), Seabury Books, 2016