

# Lutheran Church of Australia: Commission on Worship

## STATEMENT 18

### THE SERVICE WITH HOLY COMMUNION FOR MINISTRY TO THOSE WHO ARE SICK

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*Adopted by the Commission on Worship, August 1988. This statement was prepared by the Department of Liturgics in the context of questions about 'healing services'. The service for the 'Care of those who are sick' in Church Rites is also relevant.*

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The ministry of our Lord which is continued in the church through the means of grace includes both proclamation and healing (Luke 9:1,2). This work of healing by the power of the Holy Spirit affects a person's body and mind as well as the soul and spirit. It aims at the total health of a person which, although it is only fully accomplished at the resurrection (Rom 8:23), is nevertheless already provisionally and partially shown in this life. Luther refers to this total healing in the fifth section of his Small Catechism on the Lord's supper where he affirms: 'Where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation'. In fact, the word for 'salvation' in the New Testament includes physical (Matt 9:21,22) and mental healing (Luke 8:36), as well as forgiveness (Matt 1:21) and spiritual health (Mark 16:16).

Healing is therefore an important part of Christian worship, where Christ undoes the damage done by Satan (Mark 1:21–28). In every service our risen Lord comes to heal his people in some way, beginning with their washing and rebirth in baptism. The truth of this has unfortunately often been ignored in our preaching and practice. The one-sided emphasis by some Pentecostal groups on physical healing in their worship, dissociated from other kinds of healing as well as from the means of grace, is a challenge for us to rediscover the importance of healing in this wider sense within our worship and to appreciate those parts of our liturgy which have to do with healing.

#### **1 The significance for healing of the service with holy communion**

Various parts of our liturgy touch on the healing ministry of the risen Lord in our worship. Of these, the following are most important for us as Lutherans:

- **Confession and absolution**

Just as guilt from sin can lead to mental and physical sickness, so forgiveness from God results in spiritual healing, which can in turn promote mental and physical health (Ps 32:105; Matt 9:1–8; Jas 5:16). Confession and absolution are therefore an important part of the church's public ministry to people who are sick, as is demonstrated by the choice of Psalm 51:1–9 and 103:1–5 for use in the Order for Confession and Absolution.

- **Thanksgiving and praise**

As the preface to the 'Holy, holy, holy' affirms, it is 'salutary' or 'healthy' to thank and praise our heavenly Father. Such praise not only results from healing by God but also in some mysterious way results in our healing, because we human beings were made for the glory of God. Peace in the full biblical sense of the word comes to us as

we give glory to our heavenly Father through his incarnate Son, as we do when we sing the ‘Glory to God in the highest’. Spiritual, mental, and even physical healing can therefore either begin or be completed, when a person turns in faith from self-centred misery to God-centred praise.

- **Preaching**

Since Christ offers his health and salvation through his word, preaching plays a decisive role in the healing ministry of the church. Just as Christ healed sick people with his effectual word, so the proper proclamation of law and gospel brings healing in the full biblical sense to the faithful. Paul, in his pastoral letters, therefore speaks about ‘sound’ or ‘healing’ doctrine (1 Tim 1:10; 2 Tim 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1) and words (1 Tim 6:3; 2 Tim 1:13), because such preaching produces a pure heart (1 Tim 1:5; 2 Tim 2:22) and clear conscience (1 Tim 1:5; 3:9; 2 Tim 1:3) and so brings healing to those who receive it. But Christ also needs to be proclaimed as the good physician for those who are physically and mentally sick. Those stories which tell of Christ’s ministry to the sick should be used not only to teach about healing but also to preach healing to the sick.

- **Intercession**

This part of worship touches least controversially and most directly on healing. Just as in the gospels the relatives and friends of those who were sick either brought them to Jesus (eg Matt 9:1–8; Mark 7:31–37; 8:22–25) or else came to Jesus for them (eg Matt 8:5–13; 9:18–26; 15:21–28), so the congregation should pray for the healing of the sick in the prayer of the church (Jas 5:16). By its intercession the church most obviously exercises its public ministry to those who are sick.

- **The Lord’s supper**

As Lutherans we place the Lord’s supper at the centre of our ministry to the sick. If the desecration of Christ’s body and blood can lead to sickness and death, as St Paul maintains in 1 Corinthians 11:30, it also follows that its proper use brings healing and life (cf John 6:54). Luther therefore rightly describes this sacrament in his Large Catechism as ‘an entirely wholesome, soothing medicine which helps you and gives life to your body and soul’ (LC V.68). This aspect of the Lord’s supper is emphasised at two points in the liturgy. First, the words of the dismissal after the Lord’s supper affirm that the reception of Christ’s body and blood is for the benefit of the body as well as the soul. It would therefore be good if this reference were not omitted, as sometimes happens. Second, the prayer of thanksgiving after communion calls the Lord’s supper a ‘healing’ or ‘salutary’ gift. Christ’s body is therefore given to us in holy communion for the healing of our bodies.

- **The blessings**

The various blessings and greetings in the service are performative words which convey the blessing of the Triune God. This blessing from God promotes the physical and spiritual life and health of the believer. Two blessings touch in part on the matter of healing. They are the ‘peace’ after the words of institution and the words of the dismissal after the distribution. By their association with Christ’s body and blood they offer peace and therefore health to all aspects of a person’s life.

## **2 The corporate use of the service with holy communion for ministry to sick people**

The ministry of healing for those who are sick could be promoted liturgically in the following ways:

- In the prayer of the church the congregation normally prays for the healing of those who are sick. This could be highlighted and personalised more than is usual. The minister could mention those who are sick by name, if so requested, and even have them come forward, if possible, to lay hands on them as he prays for them (Mark 16:18; Acts 28:8, cf Mark 6:5).
- In the prayer of the church thanksgiving could be offered for those who have recovered from sickness after the congregation has prayed for them, just as prayers of thanksgiving have traditionally been offered after the birth of a child. In this way those who had been isolated physically, by their sickness, from the worshipping congregation would be restored to it once again (cf Ps 30; 107:17–22).
- Opportunity could be given on certain occasions for those who so desire to come forward to receive individual absolution and perhaps even a blessing from the minister with the laying on of hands after the general confession of sins (Mark 10:16).

## **3 Individual use of the service with holy communion for people seeking healing**

Apart from any special liturgical provisions, people could seek healing at any service in the following manner:

- Those who are sick and yet physically able could attend worship and seek healing for themselves in any normal service.
- People could also come to the Lord's supper for healing. It would be good if this were encouraged as the normal means for receiving help and health from God for every believer.
- Members of the church could be taught to pray during the service for those whom they know to be sick and bring them to their Lord as they attend the Lord's supper. By such personal intercession for the sick at holy communion, which has been part of Christian piety since the time of the early church, they would exercise their royal priesthood as believers in Jesus Christ and use their faith for the benefit of the sick, just as the friends of the crippled man did for him in Matthew 9:1–8 (see especially verse 2).