

MINISTRY OF COMFORT

Introduction

Some of the most spiritually distressing times in a person's life are centered around tragedy, and it is in those moments that the people of God need the presence of their pastor. These moments can take many forms - hospital stays, the death of loved ones, divorce, the loss of a job - and are often accompanied by grieving, confusion, and a sense of overwhelm. They may also involve people asking themselves how the God they hear about and pray to on Sunday morning could possibly allow such things to occur.

The pastor or lay visitor is well advised to simply be present in such moments. Even though questions are being asked, they don't necessarily need to be answered. A person in the midst of suffering and grief often just needs a hand to hold, or a firm presence on which to lean. Allow the person to share their thoughts, or to simply be silent. Your presence will be remembered far more than any deep insights you offer. Here are a few tips:

- Go to the person as soon as you hear of his or her predicament. Few appointments and tasks are more important than visiting the sick and hurting. Jesus gave immediate healing to all who needed it (except for Lazarus, of course, but this course of action is not recommended unless you are prepared to raise the dead. See John 11:1-44).
- Knock before entering, especially with hospital stays. It is not uncommon for hospital patients to be in various states of undress or in the middle of activities they would rather others did not see. You came to be a source of comfort - don't add to their distress by entering unannounced.
- Plan on short, concise visits. Those who are suffering often are exhausted from their ordeal and have scores of family members and medical personnel interrupting their rest. Ten to 15 minutes is usually sufficient. NOTE: The reverse is often true for nursing home residents. Many receive few visitors and may enjoy a lengthy visit. Be willing to stay.
- Pray as the Spirit moves you. It is not always necessary to reserve prayer for the conclusion of your visit. If the person you are visiting expresses an immediate need, pray about it right away. Conversely, some people in the midst of turmoil feel spiritually empty and unable to pray. Offer to pray on their behalf or, if they resist even that, ask their permission to include them in your private prayer time.
- Don't be afraid of physical touch. Men and women in hospitals and other clinical settings often report that the one thing they longed for - but were rarely offered - was a caring touch from another human being. Nurses and doctors are often forced to wear gloves and masks, leaving the patient feeling like the lepers of

Jesus' day. But as scripture so clearly illustrates, there is healing in the human touch. A simple holding of a hand or arm can mean a great deal to those in the midst of turmoil and suffering. Of course, use discretion and make sure the person is comfortable with such touching before offering it.

- Ask the person's permission before sharing any details with other parishioners. Many people seek to have their illness or grief kept confidential. Ask a question like, "If someone asks, what details can I share?" before leaving.

Nursing Home Visits

Get in the habit of making regular visits to nursing home residents and other shut-ins. As noted above, these special children of God often receive few visitors and feel isolated. They will enjoy any news you can share about church events. If their eyesight is reasonably good, a copy of sermons, bulletins, devotionals and other reading material is usually welcome.

Communion to and Anointing of the Sick

Visiting and exercising pastoral care for those who are sick or shut-in is one of the most precious duties of the Ministry. The model for our ministry was given by our Lord himself when he came to the bedside of Peter's mother-in-law and made himself available to those who were in need of healing. The general rule of thumb is that visits should be brief. The minister, or lay visitor, should remember that the 'ministry of presence' should speak more loudly than the words one says. The pastoral visitor should spend more time listening than talking. If possible, physical contact should be made by a touch on the hand, forearm, or shoulder. When offering prayer, after asking permission, it is appropriate to lay a hand lightly on the patient's head. A great deal of pastoral care is simply common sense and the exercise of "do unto others as you would have done unto you."

The reading of a brief passage of Scripture, the offering of a prayer, which should include mention of the patient, the patient's family and caregivers, and a blessing are appropriate parts of the visit. The *Book of Common Worship - Pastoral Edition* PCUSA has an excellent selection of Scriptural texts for use with visiting the sick and shut-in. It also has prayers for various occasions, as does the *Ministry to the Sick* from the *Book of Common Prayer*. What follows are some suggested Scriptural references and a model prayer.

Scriptural References

Deuteronomy 13:27a/Joshua 1:9/ Psalm 23/Psalm 27/Psalm 46 (especially appropriate with people prior to surgery)/Isaiah 41:10/Matthew 11:28/John 14:27/2 Corinthians 1-4, 5/1 Peter 1:3

Prayer

By your power, almighty God, your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, healed the sick and renewed their hope. We come as beggars before you and cannot command your power, we pray for your healing touch to come upon *(name)*. Mend the wounds and soothe the fevered brows of all who come seeking your help. Make the broken whole again. Help us to see you at work in the hands of those who care for *(name)* and give us a spirit of hope to welcome every sign of healing. We thank you for your love, your presence, and for the promise of healing and renewal of life through Jesus Christ. Amen.

ANOINTING OF THE SICK

Anointing the sick with oil is commended to us in the epistle of James 5: 14-15: “Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.” Olive oil should be used for this action. When anointing, the Minister should dip his/her thumb in the oil, which can be poured in a small clear glass dish, and then apply the oil to the forehead and to the backs of the hands of the patient.

During the anointing, which should follow a reading from Scripture and a time of prayer, the minister may say these or other words:

(Name) through this anointing may the Lord in love and mercy aid you with the grace and presence of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

May the Lord who frees you from sin, restore you and raise you up. Amen.

Lord Jesus Christ, our Redeemer and Healer, by the power of the Holy Spirit ease *(name)* sufferings and make *(him/her)* well again in mind and body. Grant, in your loving kindness, forgiveness of sins and full restoration of health so that *(name)* may be restored to your service, to family and to friends. We praise you and acclaim you Lord forever and ever more. Amen.

COMMUNION OF THE SICK

It is appropriate to bring the sacrament to the sick or to those who are home bound. If at all possible, the minister should be accompanied by a deacon or another member of the church. The *Pastoral Edition -Book of Common Worship* offers a well defined order and texts for communion to the homebound. What follows is a brief order for administration of communion to the sick.

Opening

Minister: Peace to this house and all who dwell here. To prepare ourselves to receive the Lord's Supper, let us call to mind our sins and ask for God's forgiveness.

(The minister may offer the prayer of confession on behalf of all present)

Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will; and walk in your ways, to the glory of your Name. Amen.

(The minister then assures of God's pardon.)

Reading from Scripture

Brief Words of Reflection

Prayers for the Sick Person and Others

The Lord's Prayer

The Words of Institution

(The minister holds the bread and says:) The Lord Jesus the same night when he was betrayed took bread, and gave thanks, and broke it, and gave it to them saying, 'Take, eat, this is my body, broken for you; do this in remembrance of me.'

Ministering to you in Christ's Name, I give you this bread.

(The minister holds the cup and says:) After supper he took the cup filled with wine, again gave thanks and praise to God and gave it to them saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, as often as you drink it in remembrance of me.'

Ministering to you in Christ's Name, I give you this cup. May the body and blood of Christ restore us and bring us all to everlasting life. Amen.

The Prayer after Communion (in these or other words)

God our Father, eternal, unchanging, almighty, we confidently call upon you and pray that the sacrament of your Son's body and blood which we have shared with *(name)* will bring *(him/her)* lasting health in spirit, mind, and body. Thank you for loving us and for willing our good. We give you praise and offer this prayer in Jesus' Name. Amen.

Blessing

May the Lord Jesus be with you to protect you. May the Lord go before you to guide you and may he stand behind you to give you strength. May the Lord look upon you to keep you and bless you always. And may the blessing of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, abide with you for evermore. Amen.

SAMPLE NURSING HOME SERVICE

The nursing home service should be brief, but not "short-changed." The rules for constructing a worship service for Sunday still apply; nursing home residents also long for an encounter with God, and the service is one vehicle through which that can happen. Therefore, a service ought to include the same "moves": Gathering, Hearing, Responding and Sending. However, the worship leader is encouraged to consider the limitations of nursing home residents. If worship bulletins are handed out, be sure the print is large and clear; if hymns are sung, the lyrics need to be large print. If the worship leader has a soft voice, be sure and bring or arrange for amplification of some kind.

The following is a brief outline of a sample service, and can be readily adapted to suit the individual context.

Call to Worship

Opening Prayer

Hymn

Scripture Reading

Message

Prayer (Petition, Guidance, Blessing, etc.)

Hymn

Benediction

MINISTRY AT THE TIME OF DEATH

It is appropriate that when death is near, a minister or a member of the family should offer the ministry of the Church for the dying person and the family. What follows is a brief service of prayer for such a time adapted from the Book of Worship of the Presbyterian Church along with some additional suggested passages of Scripture.

Invocation

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Scripture Sentence [one or more of the following is said:]

If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. *Rom. 14.8*

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. *Ps. 46.1*

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our sorrows, so that we can comfort others in their sorrow, with the consolation we have received from God. *2 Cor. 1.3-4*

Additional passages, such as Psalm 23 or John 14: 1-14, may be read at this time.

Prayer

Gracious God, look on *(person's name)*, whom you created in your image, and claimed as your own in through baptism. Comfort *(him/her)* with the promise of life eternal, made sure in the death and resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Let us pray as Jesus taught us:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Prayer of Commendation

(person's name), our *(sister/brother)* in the faith, we entrust you to God who created you. May you return to the one who formed us out of the dust of the earth. Surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses beyond all time and space, may Christ come to meet you as you go forth from this life. May Christ, the Lord of glory, who was crucified for you, bring you freedom and peace. May Christ, the High Priest, who has forgiven all your sins, keep you among his people. May Christ, the Son of God, who died for you, show you the glories of his eternal kingdom. May Christ, the Good Shepherd, enfold you with his tender care. May you see your Redeemer face to face and enjoy the sight of God for ever. Amen

For use when a life-support system is withdrawn

God of compassion and love, you have breathed into us the breath of life and have given us the exercise of our minds and wills. In our frailty we surrender all life to you from whom it came, trusting in your gracious promises; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

The minister or leader of prayer then lays a hand on the head of the dying person and says:

Depart, O Christian soul, in peace; in the name of God the Creator who formed you; in the name of Jesus Christ who redeemed you; in the name of the Holy Spirit the Comforter who sanctifies you. In communion with the saints and all the heavenly host, may you rest in peace, and dwell forever with the Lord. Amen

The leader continues:

Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant {person's name}. Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Receive *him/her* into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light. Amen

The following prayer is then said:

O Lord, support us all the day long, until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then, in your mercy, grant us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Prayer for Family and Friends

One of the following, or a similar prayer, may be said for the family and friends of the dying. Those present may be invited to offer other prayers.

Almighty God, our creator and redeemer, you are our comfort and strength. You have given us our (*sister/brother*) (*person's name*) to know and to love in our pilgrimage on earth. Uphold us now as we entrust (*her/him*) to your boundless love and eternal care. Assure us that not even death can separate us from your infinite mercy. Deal graciously with us in our anguish, that we may truly know your sure consolation and learn to live in confident hope of the resurrection; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

God of compassion, in sorrow, we receive from you the comfort you alone can give. Enable us to see that you are always working for our good. You are our dwelling place, O God, and underneath us are your everlasting arms. Assure us of your love that we may be able to accept what we cannot understand. Help us to be aware not

only of the shadows of death, but also of the splendor of life eternal. Enable us even now to face life with courage; give us the grace and the strength to go on, knowing that the great cloud of witnesses surrounds us. Let the life of *(person's name)* still inspire us. Comfort and uphold us, until we share together the light of your glory and peace of your eternal presence; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Blessing

A blessing, such as the following from Numbers 6:24-26, may be given.

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord be kind and gracious to you. The Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace. Amen