

Anglican practice of anointing with blessed oil

Pastoral and practical notes

1) Introductory

These notes assume some knowledge of the history of anointing the sick. In summary this practice follows on Jesus' words to the apostles (Mark 6.13) and the teaching of James (5.13 - 16): '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.'

These notes focus on *practical* aspects of the ministry and are provided as guidelines as we pray with and for others.

2) Authority

In the Anglican church ordained ministers have authority by way of their licence to minister. A lay person needs to be licensed in the diocese in which they serve. See the rubrics (directions) in the introduction to the Ministry of Healing Service in the NZ Prayer Book. (But note, the restriction of anointing by a priest only has been removed by a later General Synod ruling).

3) When to anoint

Scripture guidance (James 5) allows for this to be any time we pray with laying on of hands in the name of the Lord Jesus. Probably when praying in small groups we would not necessarily anoint, though it should be available. When healing prayer is offered we should expect to offer anointing, be it for the person or their loved one, or a family. It is less likely there would be anointing when an intercession for a nation or situation is the topic of the prayer request. The anointing has a 'specialness' and honours God's presence.

If you are licensed to anoint, oil should be kept in a place where it is readily accessible such as the aumbry. Note that temperature can affect its viscosity. When colder if it is cloudy it does not mean it is 'off.'

4) Preparing to anoint

The oil has been blessed usually before use, blessed by a bishop. The oil is most often contained as liquid in a small bottle or on a sponge in a stock (small container). When ready it is also helpful to have a tissue or cloth to dry one's thumb after anointing the person, especially when liquid is used.

The oil may be fragranced (as in Old Testament recipe) or non-fragranced (usually olive oil). In warmer climates it is good to keep it fresh by storing quantities in the fridge, and supplementing the container as needed. The fragranced can enhance the association with a long scriptural tradition. It also evokes the senses as part of the fullness of the prayer. Or simply olive oil is in the scripture tradition.

5) Order of the prayer

After discerning the need of the prayer intent, there would usually be a silence to be aware/ invite the Holy Spirit to guide the prayer. The James passage allows for laying on of hands first then anointing. This order is also provided for in the NZ Prayer Book Service. It suggests that the anointing 'seals' what is prayed in the prayer. Also it 'covers' any human inadequacy in the words prayed.

In some circumstances, there could be good reason to anoint first, in allowing this to be a special time assisting in creating the sacredness of the prayer, then the prayer intent with laying on of hands.

Whichever way, it may be helpful to explain what is going to happen in the actual anointing, and why ('in accord with the practice of scripture').

6) Where and how to anoint

Most often the anointing is on the forehead, using the sign of the cross. Good News Bible paraphrases the passage 'rub olive oil'. This implies more of a gentle massage of the oil and would replicate what may have happened as the anointed Jesus' head (Luke 7.36 – 50). The action of anointing on the forehead has a symbolic action of the presence of God for healing. Others hold to a belief of its 'sacramental nature' - an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.' That presence does not need to be localized when there is a focus of prayer on a part of the person's body. Indeed it would be expected in the answer to the prayer, God works 'in many and various ways.'

The prayer book service also allows for 'if the person wishes, other parts of the body may also be anointed.' This should be exercised with extreme caution as to its appropriateness.

One exception to the forehead is where there is fragranced oil for a person who had needs of ear, nose or throat. Such can aggravate the condition. If unsure, then to check with the person, possibly allowing them opportunity to smell the oil before it is applied. As an alternative it is suggested there be anointing on the inside of the person's wrist (pulse points), well away from where they would inhale the aroma.

7) Cultural considerations

In some cultures (Maori included), the prayer with laying on of hands on the head is discouraged, so it is more appropriate to place one's hands on a person's shoulder or join hands. Anointing transcends this consideration, providing it is by an ordained minister and permission is asked first. Before anointing it may be important to explain why you are offering to anoint, and the procedure, before actually anointing.

8) Occasions of anointing other than healing, while in a healing context

Where there is a commissioning, or a person is seeking guiding in the prayer, it is appropriate that as well as the forehead, there is valuable symbolism in anointing the palm of the hands, making the sign of the cross.

In bringing an end to the prayer the person's hands might then be clasped in a traditional prayer hold, offering benediction (e.g. God be with you, God comfort you.) Also there is a sense in which this allows the person to 'hold' the anointing blessing in both a symbolic and tangible way.

Prepared for circulation to those licensed to anoint, and for training purposes by Derek Lightbourne, October 2012.