

Insights into Prayer

The Experience of Healing Prayer at the Christian Fellowship of Healing

Anne Douglas, former chairperson of CFH, shares some of what she has discovered from talking to six members of the Fellowship about their practise and experience of prayer, and the meaning they attach to it.

Introduction

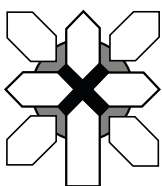
In the Summer 2011 Christian Fellowship of Healing (CFH) Newsletter I explained that I wanted to do a simple piece of research on the prayer experience and beliefs of some of our members. The rationale for doing this work was to share the research findings within CFH to help members and friends reflect on their own prayer life, and possibly distribute the work further afield. Even though CFH has now closed, as part of their closure discussions Jenny Williams, CFH Chaplain, and the Executive Committee thought that this work would be very much part of the 'treasure' of CFH and so there was value in continuing with it and distributing the findings.

The main aim of this piece of research was to capture in-depth something of the interior prayer life, and the beliefs, understanding and experience of healing prayer of a small number of CFH members. To achieve this I informally interviewed 6 members (I will call them participants), covering the same

questions in each interview. The questions were asked in relation to participants' private prayers, that is, prayers offered when they were by themselves or silently within a group setting. As probably always happen in interviews of this sort, participants also brought in some other prayer experiences.

Each interview was taped and produced 6-7 pages of typed up transcript, which perhaps gives a sense of the comprehensive and open responses given by the participants. To try to do justice to the richness and depth of their responses, I wanted to convey them as freshly as possible and have therefore quoted extensively and sought to avoid too much general summation. However, it has also been necessary to omit some of the material, simply to curtail its volume and to limit it to the main themes of the interviews.

I hope that this small piece of research assists people in considering their own prayer lives and also conveys something of the richness and complexity of the prayer terrain.



The Christian Fellowship of Healing worked from the early 1950's to support and spread the healing ministry within churches and to encourage engagement with the medical profession. It formed a loving and supportive prayer community, which sadly came to an end in December 2011. There is an expectation and trust that, after sixty years of CFH's commitment to supporting healing, God is already bringing new life and new forms to continue the ministry of healing.

Former CFH resources can be found in the National Library and at:

www.st-cuthberts.net | www.emmaushouse-edinburgh.co.uk | www.mindandsoul.info

Methods

Sample

My original intention was to ‘capture’ something of the prayer understanding and experience of CFH members/friends who had been part of CFH for some years and who attended one of the weekly groups or were intercessors. In discussing this with Jenny, it seemed that there could be benefit in having some in the sample who were newer to CFH but who nonetheless showed commitment to CFH through either attendance at a weekly group or in some other way (for example, being part of the Executive Committee). The sample had to be small because of my time constraints and so I asked 6 people if they would be willing to be interviewed about their prayer life, focusing on their private prayers. All of them agreed to this and accordingly I interviewed two men and four women, to reflect the predominance of CFH female membership.

Whilst most of CFH members are well into their 70s and 80s, there are a few younger people who have been involved and so one of the interviewees was in their 40s, one in their late 60s, three in their 70s and one in their 80s. At the time of interview all were part of at least one weekly CFH group; two had been involved in CFH for about 5 years, two for 15 years and two for 30+ years.

Again to have some diversity in a small sample and aim at a very approximate cross section of CFH members and friends, interviewees were also selected on what was known about their current or past church denomination. Two of the sample did not have a current church connection but all had clear past church affiliations. This gave me four of a sample who had either Church of Scotland or Anglican and Episcopalian affiliations and the remainder with Catholic and Evangelical church connections.

Questions & Interviews

The reasons for choosing the interview questions was largely on the basis of my personal knowledge of CFH over the past 7 years, and also what I have learnt of CFH and its history from Jenny.

I wanted the interviewees to speak freely about their interior prayer life and so the questions were meant to elicit open and reasonably spontaneous responses. The main questions were each supplemented with three questions, although often these were answered when responding to the main question, or indeed elsewhere in the interview. Whilst I indicated the general question headings in the Summer 2011 CFH Newsletter article, the participants did not see my questions in advance and this was to encourage an immediate and fresh response on being asked a question. I have no idea whether there is any justification

for this approach but having done it this way, I experienced the participants as very honest and open and I had no sense of rehearsed or formulaic responses.

These are the questions that I asked:

Demographics

- age
- length of time been involved with CFH
- CFH group you are currently part of
- church denomination, if any

Introduction –prayer/healing

- what is your earliest memory of prayer
- can you describe when you first encountered healing prayer – either as a recipient or person praying

Main Questions

1. How do you pray for the healing of another

- are your healing prayers different from other prayers
- what do you mean by healing
- how do you pray for someone you do not know

2. What do you understand or believe happens when you pray for healing

- how does healing occur
- what is your role in relation to the person you are praying for
- what is your most memorable experience of healing prayer

3. What do you experience when you pray for healing

- can you describe anything that happens in or to you when you pray
- have you ever had any experience or sense of what is happening for the person you are praying for
- have you ever had any troubling or worrying experiences in these prayers? If so what were these? How did you deal with these experiences?

Ending Question

- Is there anything important that you wish to say or that I haven't asked about?

To allow the interviews to be informal and enable them to flow, I asked supplementary questions where these were needed for clarification or to encourage a fuller response. Half the interviews lasted just under one hour and the other half were around 45 minutes. So a huge amount of material was generated, as I realized on typing up the transcripts!

Results

Introductory comments

The amount of material produced from these interviews could probably fill a book, so rather than try to capture everything that was covered I focus on the three main question headings, that is:

- how the participants pray for the healing of another
- what they understand or believe happens when they pray for healing
- what they experience when they pray for healing

Participants sometimes answered these questions in response to other questions and so I have extrapolated their answers from the whole interview.

Praying for the healing of another

How the participants described their private prayers for healing was very much linked with more general descriptions and explanations of prayer. For two of the participants there were regular rituals involved in their healing prayers, for example, praying at home before a small statue of the Virgin Mary with candles and incense and then 'saying the name of the person

and leaving that in silence'. This prayer practice arose because of the participant's experience of being alongside someone who was dying and this was when she started praying to the Virgin Mary: 'I thought she would understand because she had lost her son'. She described healing prayers as 'more intense' than other prayers. For another, healing prayer was part of a prayer time each morning, which included bible reading and in respect of healing prayers, sometimes bringing in the words of Psalm 27 specifically, "My heart says of you 'Seek his face!' Your face, Lord, I will seek" (verse 8). These words were sometimes accompanied by the participant moving his chair to face the rising sun.

But for the other participants healing prayers were not necessarily separate from other prayers. For one they were part of an inner, 'intimate conversation' with God: 'I really pray for help for these people... and then I... tag on things that I want to improve in my own life and confess things that I've done'. For another, prayer was essentially an on-going process of turning to God, praying for 'people as I see them on the street or in the bus or wherever'. Part of this process also included bringing to God specific people who came to mind or for whom there had been prayer requests.

For one person prayer generally was experienced as quite nebulous. For example, she considered that '... a Creator God is around and I don't know that I [have to] specially contact this Creator God'. It followed from this that it was difficult for her to describe any 'how' of prayer.

For all the participants being in a relevant frame of mind seemed to be crucial to their healing (and other) prayers. For one person this was expressed in terms of quieting the mind: 'I sit and try to quiet myself down inside – I suppose you would call it meditation'. For others being able to visualize or having a felt sense of the presence of God was key to their description of



praying for the healing of others. Images of light and a flow of love were common themes with three of the participants:

‘I try holding them into the light... For me light is healing; it is bright, clear and pure so symbolizes healing, cleanness and purity’

‘I’ll often have a picture of a triangle with me here, the person there and God there and a flow of love or healing going I don’t know quite where – definitely reciprocal. I certainly have a vision of energy of some sort going between us and God as part of that...’

‘Once I feel the presence of God I tend to pray for healing... I just feel very peaceful, a warmth about unfolding yourself to Him... I just feel that He is hearing’.

For one participant the essence of healing prayer was quite simply ‘remembering [friends] with love’.

What is meant by healing?

This question was asked in the context of how the participant prayed for the healing of another. The participants explored what they understood was meant by healing throughout the interview. However, as part of the overview question of how they prayed for the healing of another, they were specifically asked what they meant by the word healing. They responded in terms of what they asked for in their healing prayers, by giving examples of their own healing experiences and also offered general definitions of healing.

Whilst all the participants understood healing to be very much more than bodily healing, the body was specifically mentioned by three participants. One participant stated that: ‘I’m never frightened to pray for physical healing’. This contrasted with another person who said that ‘I tend to pray more for people’s emotional side... I do occasionally pray for people’s direct physical healing... The truth is that I don’t think that physical healing can’t happen, but there is a part of me doesn’t really expect it [to happen]’. Another participant, speaking of their own healing, thought of the body as ‘healing all the time’ and so ‘what we need to do is allow and encourage it to heal and I can get a bit of direction and help about what I need to do by being quiet in the presence of God...’

Healing as a long process was emphasized by three of the participants. One

was of the view that ‘... healing is a life long thing. I think when we are completely healed is when we die’. Another person spoke of ‘a journey to wholeness’ which would mean something different for every person, but in general terms meant ‘to be able to live with integrity with all the different parts of your life’.

One participant gave an example of their own healing which was initiated by a Christian healer, that brought about an immediate sense of a physical change, but then the healing took ‘months to unfold’, involved seeking the help of others and was experienced as deep and long ‘almost taking me right back to the beginning, [to being] a baby’.

Attitude, changed perception and coping were also themes of the participants responses to what they meant by healing. For one person this was reflected in what they prayed for others ‘... for them to learn how to love, to love Jesus and to be open in some way to change...’ Another thought that their emphasis in prayer was more on the other ‘finding strength within a situation to deal with what they are going through, to find courage within that and that their fear will be manageable... [that] they will find an answer, that it will bring some sort of transformation within their struggle.’ For one person coping was part of their understanding of healing: ‘... they [person prayed for] are more able to cope with difficulties they are having [and may have] a change of mind’

For another their general understanding of healing, including the healing of the body was: ‘To come to accept what is wrong with you and to live your life in the best way possible’.

How do you pray for someone you do not know?

At CFH the thread that ran through all the weekly groups was praying for people named on prayer cards, who would receive prayer for 8 weeks, and also for those named on short term prayer requests who would usually receive prayer for a week. I was aware from my time at CFH that not everyone found it easy to pray for those at a distance they did not know, and I was therefore interested in how the participants responded to the question ‘how do you pray for someone you do not know?’. I was also curious to see what their responses would show about their beliefs and understanding of healing (explored below).

For two of the participants there was no perception of it being more difficult to pray for those they did not know rather than those known to them. One person, who regularly prayed at home for those not known to her, reflected on how she prayed at CFH with the prayer cards and simply said that she tried to ‘enfold them in God’s love and ask for the blessings [requested] and for God’s will to be done’.



Another person also referred to the CFH cards and in a way sought clues about what a person may be experiencing from the particular graces requested. She described her prayer as ‘... all I can say is [God] be with them and support them... You just have to trust in God that he will show you what these words mean and that you will be a channel for their healing.’

Two of the participants expressly stated that they found it difficult praying for those they did not know, particularly where they had little or no information about why prayer was requested. One person sometimes ‘asked [the people named on the cards] to come and sit with me. That’s the most I can manage to do. It’s difficult because there’s a part of you as a spiritual person knows that God can move in... it’s still hard and difficult’. For another participant, trying to create some sort of connection was very important in praying for unknown people – and again this was in the context of reading a name on a CFH prayer card. ‘In terms of making that connection I think I tried to make an emotional contact within myself, in the sense of trying to take that name ... and the words that have been requested and bring them together and try and get a felt sense of compassion, somehow that is really the only thing that makes sense...’.

One of the participants found it difficult to believe in the efficacy of praying for unknown people at a distance. She reflected on what, if anything, might be healing in these circumstances: ‘It is maybe really good for somebody who has asked for prayer to think that people are thinking of them and in a way, that’s probably what I would see as the healing bit.’

Understanding and belief about what happens when praying for healing

To help participants explore what they understood and/or believed happens when they prayed for healing, I also asked them how they thought healing happens, what they understood their role to be in offering healing prayers and any memorable experiences they had of healing prayer. Participants tended to bring in their experience of praying silently for someone with them, their own experience of receiving healing prayer and when they prayed for others at a distance.

What all the participants offered was tentative; not knowing how healing happened and the mystery of it were repeatedly emphasized. However, certain words or phrases were commonly used as the participants tried to find language for their beliefs about what may be happening when they pray for healing.

How does healing occur?

The notion of the person praying as being a channel was common to five of the participants, although understood in different ways. For example, ‘I think

you somehow become a channel – a channel linking the person you are praying for, that you are giving them the Spirit... That when you are being open to God, then somehow they are open to God...’ Another person spoke in similar terms, in respect of healing that he had received in the presence of others, particularly drawing on the beliefs, trust and faith of those who prayed for him: ‘they had opened a channel of healing for me which I do believe came from somewhere else; it wasn’t theirs...’. This participant also spoke of his openness to receiving the healing.

The channel idea was also expressed in terms of connectivity. One person speaking about CFH’s soaking prayer, where an individual would receive mostly silent prayer from a group of 3 or 4 people for about an hour, thought that ‘... a connection happens between the people [praying] and the person [being prayed for] which maybe opens the channels to their healing or peace and I’m more likely to talk about peace because that is the situation in which we heal.’

Connectivity was a word used throughout the interview by one of the participants, often in conjunction with ‘energy’ and ‘relationship’. He explored extensively throughout the interview what he considered happened in healing prayer (both when in the presence of another and at a distance) and offered some general reflections on how he thought healing happened through prayer: ‘I don’t know what I think prayer is but at times I do believe it is about a resonance and an energy which actually go out to somebody’. ‘Prayer is about connection and compassion and trying to put something transformative, transformative energy, into the world...’ ‘[Prayer] is about going beyond yourself to somebody or something beyond the individual [and] seeing the whole of life, people, creation as being in relationship and not separate... Prayer somehow fits into that – it’s about binding things together, making connections between things in mysterious ways...’.

The participants were reluctant to ascribe a set of conditions to what might bring about healing from prayer. One person spoke about factors that she thought mitigated against healing, namely a pessimistic or negative attitude or fearfulness.

What is your role in relation to person you are praying for?

The role of the participants was very much tied in with their explanations as to how healing happened and, as noted above, the idea of being a channel was central to their explanations. However, a few of the participants explored more fully what they meant by



being a channel in healing prayer. One participant spoke of love in this context: 'My role is to understand them [person being prayed for], to go on loving them although that might be very difficult sometimes and in some way to be a friend, a spiritual friend – I just mean to be part of the channel which is there for everybody'. This channel was understood in terms of belief: '... I know that I've got a belief in the existence and presence of God and certainly the presence of Jesus and ... the presence of the Holy Spirit and because that is in me I can be some sort of help to a person... '.

One person explained how in acting as 'a conduit between God and the world, God comes through you... ', but that this is not for the purpose of direct answers being given to specific requests. Rather, '... you almost stand back and make the prayer wider so it's just a blessing for whatever they need and that blessing might actually be quite difficult because it might be a challenge that they go through... '.

What is your most memorable experience of healing prayer?

A couple of the participants gave in the course of their interview quite striking examples of healing prayer, including being witness to healing. I have provided two examples, one where the participant received healing and the other where the participant was the person praying.

In respect of the first of these experiences, the participant was in something of a crisis of faith, had attended an evening service and on his way home was praying to God about his faith. He described '... suddenly I fell to my knees and the words I used were 'surrender' or something like that, and the most wonderful feeling came into my body... I don't know if I made this up afterwards, but the word is like being in love. And that was a real turning point for me... I was a changed person.' He understood this experience as being touched by the Holy Spirit in a dramatic way.

The other participant spoke of praying for a friend at a time when she was attending an interview: '... I held her in my imagination for about 1 ½ hours and then stopped because I thought she would have finished... She said [later] that it went fine until this time and then she fell to bits... that was quite a salutary lesson that I haven't forgotten, but I don't quite know what it means but it seemed to mean something.' On reflecting about this experience the participant spoke about a connection, specifically that '... there seems to be some way in which love can make a connection'. She also thought that in general terms '... in some way because they have asked for prayer they have already opened a connection to God by merely asking for prayer.'

Experiences when praying for healing

Questions under this heading were asked about anything that the participants experienced in themselves when they were praying for the healing of others and anything that they sensed about the prayer recipient. In response to these questions participants largely drew on their experiences of private prayer, but also included when they had prayed with someone.

In relation to praying for those at a distance three of the participants had experienced positive feelings during these prayers. For example, 'I have a sense of putting it [the prayer issue] in the right place and now it's up to God [and] I don't have to carry it so much'. For another: '... I experience a feeling of peace and gentleness'.

One of the participants used to get images – pictures – when praying in a group for someone who had asked for healing prayer. She was careful as to how this was construed and commented that '[the picture] was not necessarily for them [person being prayed for], it might well have been for me, and so you would offer it tentatively... '.

One person had a sense of tingling in his fingers and hands, when praying by himself, although did not consider himself to have a hands-on healing gift.

There was only participant who had a clear sense of what was happening for the person being prayed for at a distance. In some instances, these were positive feelings '... that things are all right or that a corner has been turned... '. However, for this participant there could also be a sense of a darkness and pain that the other was experiencing, even when she had no knowledge of that person. 'There are times when I pick up a card or short-term prayer at CFH knowing nothing about the person and it's like a knife in my heart... Sometimes I get a very black feeling when I have some of the cards... ' In asking more about these feelings, the person explained that there is a sense of connection or 'spiritual link' and that sometimes the feelings can 'linger on'. If these are negative, there may be a sense of continuing 'heaviness' which will 'dissipate eventually' and fortunately, she knew of some things she could do, such as saying the Jesus Prayer, to reduce the burden of these experiences.

Other Responses

There was much else said by the participants, but unfortunately it is not possible to include all of their material in this paper. However, all the participants spoke about CFH and although it is not the purpose of this paper to reflect back their particular thoughts about CFH there were a couple of phrases that perhaps summarize what they experienced as healing at CFH:

‘I found the atmosphere so peaceful, loving and gentle... It just stood out, a world apart from anything I’d experienced... And it was just a beautiful atmosphere of kindness and understanding and no pushing in any direction – you were just accepted for where you were at.’

‘... the healing thing we do [at CFH] is to love people, to love and accept them and it was certainly that which was healing for me... and not having to do anything...’

One final response which will perhaps resonate with many who were part of CFH:

‘Over the last few years knowing that this place [CFH] was here and that people were praying, almost at a background level [has] been quite important... a group of people who just pray faithfully day in and day out – it’s quite significant. Especially in the context of our society which is in so many ways unspiritual for me and it’s about doing something, which on so many levels, can seem a bit stupid, a bit of a waste of time and here I am talking about it but I can’t give any clear answers as to what I think happens. But there’s something about the mystery and the trust, almost sublime trust at times, just throwing your internal stuff out there and something about the faithfulness and commitment – it’s a different way of being. There’s mystery in it, yet we do it.’

Reflections

Often in a research paper there is a Discussion section which reflects on the research findings in the light of other relevant studies. However in this paper I was keen for the participant responses to be centre stage, and perhaps drawn on as a source of reflection by people who pray. I therefore did not want to have academic style discussion but thought it may be more helpful to offer some observations and reflections on the interview material, as well as a few general comments about prayer research.

Sometimes when doing a piece of research like this comparisons would be made amongst the participants to see if there were similarities or differences according to age, sex, church denomination and so on. However, with these interviews the responses did not easily fall into similarities or differences by such categories. But there are a few category observations that I can make:

- the person who could most fully describe their thoughts and understanding of healing and prayer was the youngest participant, who also had the fewest years at CFH;
- the person with the most striking personal experiences of healing – both as a witness to and as a recipient of – was the oldest participant and had

the longest connection with CFH; and

- the two participants who had been part of CFH for the most years were the ones who used the word ‘love’ most often in their interviews. Indeed for one of these participants love was essential to all that she said about healing and prayer.

There were various responses in the interviews which have not been incorporated into this paper. For example, praying for world-wide situations, perhaps prompted by news items. This was mentioned by two of the participants as part of their answer to my question about praying for people not known to them.

There were also repeated words or themes that tended to be present in each interview, such as the importance of love or a sense of awe that comes from understanding that there is personal relationship with God. Because similarities and differences are pulled from across the interviews, the significance of these words/themes to that individual cannot be fully conveyed.

In explaining how healing occurred most of the participants did not make clear distinctions between praying for people at a distance and being in their presence: acting as a channel was the pivotal concept in both situations. However, it is perhaps a weakness of this piece of research that there is no clear demarcation between when participants were speaking about offering healing prayers by themselves, from when they were alongside others (usually at a CFH group) and perhaps in the presence of the person receiving the healing prayers.

It had been suggested to me that I include a question about any troubling or worrying experiences that participants might have had in their healing prayers. I was aware that a few CFH members could have a sense of what an unknown person at a distance might be experiencing, but had never spoken to any such members and was therefore uncertain that this particular question would be met with any response by the participants in these interviews. However, I was very struck by the clarity and down to earth way the one participant who had these experiences, spoke of them, but was also struck by how the ‘heaviness’ from the experiences could linger on. Two other participants also spoke of having had a sense of something unwholesome, but not within a praying or healing context. It is worth drawing attention to this aspect of prayer, because it seems to either not be spoken of or dismissed as impossible¹.

In respect of prayer research there are a couple of points that maybe worth making. I noticed at the end of 2011 that the US Social Science Research Council and Templeton Foundation were looking for research proposals on various social and psychological aspects

of prayer. This was of interest because it appeared that prayer had gone onto the academic back burner after the publication of two large-scale, very expensive US trials in 2006², which sought to test the effectiveness of intercessory prayer for certain cardiac care patients. It seems though that there may now be a move away from attempts to research the efficacy of prayer as the funders were looking for ‘proposals ... that will shed new light on the relationships between the practice of prayer and virtue, human flourishing, altruism, and creativity’³

The second point is that when I was considering how to do a piece of research for CFH I was certainly influenced by two qualitative studies, one about an informal weekly woman’s prayer group, where the researcher observed the group and collectively interviewed the women,⁴ and another where the researcher interviewed Trappist monks about compassionate love⁵. I felt that these styles of research allowed the complexity of their subject matter to be fully explored and not compromised. David Aldridge, a professor of qualitative research in medicine, talks about how in ‘understanding the stories people tell us of their healing and the insights this brings we may begin truly to understand the efficacy of prayer’.⁶ I believe that the other side of this coin is to listen to the stories of those involved in prayer, and perhaps in marrying the prayers’ stories with those who are prayed for we may gain some understanding of prayer.

Conclusion

The risk in carrying out any sort of research is the loss of some texture and depth of material because of the requirement to hone in on specific areas and to make generalisations. It occurred to me when pulling together similarities across the interviews that whilst people may, for example, pray for the same sorts of things or pray in an externally similar way, this does not mean that these similarities are informed by shared beliefs or experiences. I was aware how the participants offered very tentative views on prayer and healing, and I wondered if they might be looking to express that which is hidden in layers beneath the reach of words. Indeed it is hard to see how research can shed light on that which is beneath or beyond words, such as a person’s deepest beliefs and truest intentions. Yet, perhaps it is these very qualities which are of the essence to any prayer offered.

Thank you to the participants for their willingness to be part of this research, for their time and their openness.

Notes

(Endnotes)

¹ See for example criticisms of intercessory prayer studies made by researchers such as Kevin Masters (2005) Research on the Healing Power of Distant Intercessory Prayer: Disconnect Between Science and Faith Journal of Psychology and Theology Vol 33(4) 268-277

² Kruckoff, M et al (2005) Music, imagery, touch and prayer as adjuncts to interventional cardiac care: the Monitoring and Actualisation of Noetic Trainings (MANTRA) II randomised study The Lancet 366 July, 211-217 & Benson, H et al (2006) Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer (STEP) in cardiac bypass patients: A multicenter randomised trial of uncertainty and certainty of receiving intercessory prayer American Heart Journal 151(4) 934-942

³ <http://www.ssrc.org/workspace/uploads/docs/rfp-research.pdf> [accessed December 2011]

⁴ Day, Abby (2005) – Doing Theodicy: An Empirical Study of a Women’s Prayer Group Journal of Contemporary Religion Vol 20, No 3, 343-356

⁵ Underwood, Lynn (2005) Interviews with Trappist Monks as a Contribution to Research Methodology in the Investigation of Compassionate Love Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour 35:3, 285-302

⁶ Aldridge, D (2003) A qualitative research perspective on healing IN Jonas, W & Crawford, C ed Healing Intention and Energy Medicine – Science, Research Methods and Clinical Implications Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone

