

PARISH NURSING: A Beneficial Partnership for Clergy

by Reverend Deborah Patterson

Parish nursing is the intentional integration of the practice of faith with the practice of nursing.

I have been involved with parish nursing for eleven years, most recently as the executive director of the International Parish Nurse Resource Center in St. Louis, Missouri. Since 1985, when the Rev. Dr. Granger Westberg started parish nursing near Chicago, about 7,000 congregations around the United States and abroad have developed parish nurse ministries. Parish nursing also has roots in the Deaconess movement started by the Rev. Theodore Fliedner of Kaiserswerth, Germany, where Florence Nightingale obtained her nursing education in the nineteenth century. Why are clergy finding parish nursing such a beneficial partnership at this time?

What Is Parish Nursing?

This mission statement for parish nursing was developed by over 600 parish nurses at the 14th Annual Westberg Symposium in 2000: "Parish nursing is the intentional integration of the practice of faith with the practice of nursing so that people can achieve wholeness in, with, and through the community of faith in which parish nurses serves. Parish nurses educate, advocate, and activate people to take positive action regarding wellness, prevention, appropriate treatment of illness, and social and spiritual connections with God, members of their congregations, and their wider community."

A parish nurse serves a number of roles in a local congregation and neighborhood. To understand these roles, it is helpful first to note what a parish nurse is not:

- * A parish nurse is not a physician, and will not diagnose or treat illness.
- * A parish nurse is not a home healthcare nurse, and will not dispense medications or provide treatments prescribed by a physician.
- * A parish nurse is not a therapist, and will not do physical therapy, occupational therapy, or psychotherapy.
- * A parish nurse is not a clergyperson. All parish nurses come to the field with a deep spiritual commitment, however.

The roles of a parish nurse usually include the following:

Integrator of faith and health. Health is a holistic way of living that embraces life in its fullness, including the pursuit of a healthy spiritual life and connection with God and God's people. A parish nurse assists parishioners to achieve higher levels of wellness by improving both their spiritual and physical health.

Health educator. Most physicians have only a few minutes to spend with each of their many patients. Parish nurses are available for health education and provide opportunities to learn about health issues, individually and in groups.

Health counselor. Parishioners may have been seen by their physicians and do not fully understand their diagnoses or options for treatment. They may have medications that have been improperly dispensed. They may wonder if their concerns even warrant seeing a doctor. A parish nurse is available to discuss health concerns, emphasizing early response to small problems and encouraging healthy lifestyles.

Referral advisor. Where does a parishioner go for a second opinion, a good nursing home for a loved one, a counselor, or another service? A parish nurse is available to provide referrals to healthcare and social services within the community upon request.

Health advocate. Far too often, patients lose their way through the jagged maze of the healthcare system. A parish nurse can help navigate. A parish nurse speaks out to help obtain needed health-related services.

Developer of support groups. A community often has need for groups such as grief support, weight-loss support, or caregiver support. A parish nurse facilitates the development of support groups for the faith community and others served.

Volunteer coordinator. Transportation to medical appointments, food during convalescence, or childcare support can be provided through volunteers. A parish nurse recruits, prepares, and oversees congregational volunteers who help those in need.

A parish nurse's specific assignments within the ministry of a congregation are decided in consultation with other church leaders and/or a "health cabinet" in the parish. They may design an outreach ministry to the surrounding neighborhood or a very specialized ministry, such as within a school. Most parishes, however, prefer their parish nurses to serve broadly in response to the varied needs of the congregation and neighborhood.

Why Does a Pastor Benefit from Having a Parish Nurse on Staff?

Parish nursing is rewarding work for those registered nurses who are attracted to the field. Parish nursing provides a setting in which to help people regardless of their ability to pay, the opportunity to visit people in the context of their community setting in order to best assess their support networks, and an ability to integrate faith as a factor when doing health assessment and education. Clergy also have a great deal to gain from developing parish nursing as part of their congregation's ministry, as well. Here are six reasons that a pastor benefits from having a parish nurse on staff:

Much of a pastor's ministry is health-related. Pastors deal with parishioner's health concerns on a daily basis - visiting parishioners who are hospitalized, homebound, or residents of nursing homes, for example. Many of the concerns brought to pastors during worship or pastoral care have health-related components. Clergy work daily for the health and wholeness of their congregations. A parish nurse can help support these efforts.

Volunteers are not as available as they were in the past. The days of having large numbers of ready church volunteers are over in most places of the country. The pastor is expected to do much of the work of the church alone. A parish nurse can help share visitation. He or she also can work with a "health cabinet" to identify, train, and support those volunteers who are available, so that their efforts can be coordinated.

Other sectors of the society are looking to churches to pick up the pieces. Congregations are often called by hospitals to help arrange for supportive care for patients about to be discharged. People are falling through the cracks of the healthcare system. President Bush's "Faith-Based Initiative" presupposes that churches are able to take on a larger share of care for those in need of assistance, and individuals are coming to congregations for help. Parish nurses can help triage these needs, and address those that can be met.

Clergy and the church have leadership roles in healthcare. Historically, clergy and the church have played leadership roles in healthcare, starting most of the hospitals, for example. It is time for clergy and congregations to reclaim a voice in the health of the community. The parish nursing model helps to do this in a way that builds a strong bridge between medical and faith communities. A parish nurse understands both worlds well and can help parishioners traverse that divide.

The church has a biblical mandate to preach, teach, and heal. Visit most congregations and you will find preaching every week. You will find teaching through Sunday school or adult education. However, you might be hard-pressed to find an organized ministry of healing. This is a broken and wounded world, and the church is called to follow Jesus in the ministry of healing. Pastors and parish nurses together can do great things in Jesus' name.

Parish nurses improve the health of pastors. Parish nurses not only are advocates for the health of parishioners, they also improve clergy health. The most common changes in health behaviors among congregants and church leaders in a church with a parish nurse are healthier diets, increased exercise, increased use of seatbelts, and more regular health screenings. Many pastors have improved health thanks to a parish nurse.

The Bottom Line

The bottom line is that parish nursing can be a part of a congregation's ministry that addresses the church's mandate to preach, teach, and heal. It does so in a way that addresses the brokenness in today's healthcare system, which was started by the church. Parish nursing can make a pastor's life easier and even improve the pastor's health!

Roles of a parish nurse:

- * Integrator of faith and health
- * Health educator
- * Health counselor
- * Referral advisor

- * Health advocate
- * Developer of support groups
- * Volunteer coordinator

Pastor benefits from having a parish nurse on staff:

- * Much of a pastor's ministry is health-related.
- * Volunteers are not as available as they were in the past.
- * Other sectors of the society are looking to churches to pick up the pieces.
- * Clergy and the church have leadership roles in healthcare.
- * The church has a biblical mandate to preach, teach, and heal.
- * Parish nurses improve the health of pastors.

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