

A HEALING MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH

Thirty years ago, when Rev. Dr. Granger Westberg, 1911–1999, envisioned the professional specialty practice of “Parish Nursing” within the Christian faith community, he did so grounded in a ministry of response to the call to serve those in need of God’s love and care through “preaching, teaching, and healing.” This is made clear in the title of his groundbreaking book, *The Parish Nurse: How to Start a Parish Nurse Program in Your Congregation*, in 1987, and the second edition with his daughter, Jill Westberg McNamara, published in 1990 titled, *The Parish Nurse: Providing a Minister of Health for Your Congregation*. The original text was written after testing parish nursing through pilot projects in Tucson, Arizona; Sioux City, Spencer, and Des Moines, Iowa; San Jose, California; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Chicago, Illinois. By the time the book was in its second printing, there were already several hundred Parish Nurses across the country. Today there are approximately 15,000 Faith Community Nurses in a variety of congregations, synagogues, and mosques around the United States and abroad.

Dr. Westberg (1990) said about the professional work of these pioneers: “Parish nurses serve first of all as health educators, planning and organizing seminars, workshops, and classes on a wide range of health and wellness topics” (p. 10). This “first of all” work would be open to the community, in order to reach out to the entire neighborhood, the “parish” in its broadest definition. He writes as an observation about those early health ministries, “A growing number of churches are intentionally becoming centers to which people can turn for healthcare with a spiritual dimension. These congregations ask how they can help bring about a climate that promotes wholistic living” (p. 11). “Wholistic” is the spelling Westberg intentionally used for the word “holistic,” to distinguish it from the field of “Holistic Medicine” that was more associated with complementary medicine, and to connect this form of healthcare with care of body,

Meet Granger Westberg,
founder of Parish Nursing, at
links.lww.com/NCF-JCN/A5,
courtesy of the International
Parish Nurse Resource Center
(parishnurses.org).

mind, and spirit in the context of faith communities located within neighborhoods of various cities and towns.

Certainly, all parish nurses had other roles within their congregation and community but many of them focused primarily on service to members of their congregation as they prioritized the needs of the community. That focus, though, did not minimize the breadth of the ministry or mission of the parish nurse role. To quote Westberg again, “They are also personal health counselors, meeting with church members to talk over health problems and questions. Parish nurses are teachers of volunteers, identifying and training lay people to serve as visitors, leaders of programs, and volunteers in a variety of capacities. Parish nurses serve as liaisons with community health organizations, acting as gatekeepers, opening doors to many types of health care for those needing such care. They also are clarifiers of the close relationship between faith and health, talking with church members about the deeper issues of life related to their health” (1990, p. 10).

WHAT IS A “PARISH”?

While the generic interfaith moniker of “Faith Community Nursing” is certainly appropriate to describe this broad specialty practice across all faiths, the title “Parish Nurse” should not be abandoned by those working in the context of Christian faith communities. In Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, and some Lutheran communions, the word “parish” was traditionally used to define the entire geographic

community—both parish or church members and nonmembers. This is why some states like Louisiana call counties or geographic areas “parishes.” Everyone in the county was included.

The words “congregation” and “church” are used more often by Protestants than the word “parish,” but those terms generally refer to the members who have chosen to belong to that particular faith community or church, and don’t include the greater surrounding community. Indeed, the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2010) defines “parish” as follows: (1) the ecclesiastical unit of area committed to one pastor; the residents of that area; (2) a local church community composed of the members or constituents of a Protestant church; and (3) a civil division of the state of Louisiana corresponding to a county in other states.

In Christian usage, the word, “parish” comes from the Koineia Greek word, *paroikos*, which combines two words, *para* (stranger), and *oikos* (house), or literally, “stranger in the house.” Therefore, Christian parish nurses would definitely include those in the neighborhood—anyone’s neighborhood!

FAITH COMMUNITY NURSING: LIMITS OF THE LANGUAGE IN CHRISTIAN SETTINGS

For Christian settings, the term “Parish Nurse” seems more appropriate than “Faith Community Nursing” because it implies that this specialty practice and ministry is *more* than just nursing *within* a faith community. It is *more* than just offering services *to* a faith community. It is *more* than just offering services *out of* a faith community. It is an integrated ministry forming a bridge between the church and the wider community. The term “Faith Community Nursing” does not go far enough to convey the outreach that as Christians, we are called to ministries of service. Parish nurses visit with neighbors of members, open their exercise programs to the community, and offer health education classes to all. Parish nurses partner with others to develop

community healthcare clinics and services for the poor and underserved. Their work is seen both as ministry to the congregation, and as compassion to those outside the walls of the community. Their work is *evangelism*, in the fullest sense of the word. It is part of the Good News of Christ's healing love.

Today, faith communities often find themselves popular institutions with those whose services are for sale. Many healthcare agencies, for example, see the churchgoing segment of the population, which is estimated to include over 40% of the population on any given Sunday, as an untapped market for clients. Parish nursing, however, is not a way for community healthcare organizations to "get into churches." Parish nursing is a way for churches to "get into the community." It is also an important and vital way for churches to serve those who are already there, in the sanctuary in chairs or pews, in the Sunday school rooms, in the choir room, the foyer, in small groups meeting in homes. It is a way to serve the homebound or chronically ill and their families near and far. It is "PARISH" nursing in the true sense of the word.

SCOPE AND STANDARDS OF PRACTICE

The International Parish Nurse Resource Center honors those who serve in other faith traditions and understands the American Nurses Association's (ANA) request to make the specialty's name inclusive. To understand the specialty's framework, the *Faith Community Nursing: Scope and Standards of Practice* states: "To have one name inclusive of all faith traditions and to accurately label the location and focus of practice, the specialty practice described in this document is titled 'faith community nursing'" (ANA, 2005, p. 2). The Scope and Standards of Practice goes on to state that the faith community nurse may still be referred to as a

parish nurse, congregational nurse, health ministry nurse, crescent nurse, or health and wellness nurse" (p. 2) to fit the community's culture and faith tradition.

It also is important to note, however, that the specialty practice described in the Scope and Standards of Practice defines Faith Community Nursing as follows: "Faith community nursing is the specialized practice of professional nursing that focuses on the intentional care of the spirit as part of the process of promoting wholistic health and preventing or minimizing illness in a faith community" (ANA, 2005, p. 1). We believe that in Christian settings, it should be MORE—it should be a ministry to the whole *parish* (i.e., the whole community), not just to the members of the congregation.

OUR ROOTS AS HEALERS

In the terminology of today's faith community nursing specialty, Jesus was

a "Faith Community Healer," but also *so much more*. "He went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness" (Matthew 9:35, NIV). But he didn't stop with his own community. "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field'" (Matthew 9:36-38, NIV).

Further, when Jesus told the Canaanite woman, a non-Jew whose daughter was ill, that he was sent only to the "lost sheep of Israel," she replied, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour" (Matthew 15:22-28, NIV).

Parish nurses serving in Christian settings are indeed Faith Community Nurses, but they are *more*. They are called to serve their congregations and their surrounding communities—to serve their parishes. Parish nursing is rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. For a Christian calling, Parish Nurse is an honored title that any registered nurse educated in the specialty and serving a Christian faith community should be honored to hold. 🌿

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