

Rediscovering Health as Mission: the Key Role of the Faith Community Nurse/Parish Nurse



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“Parish Nursing has been the most significant ministry in mission that I have encountered in 25 years of leadership” (experienced minister, leading a church in the UK.)¹

If, as a church-leader or planter, you could employ someone to serve alongside you whose work enables contact with one third more people than you presently know, would you want to read on? And if that person regularly had the opportunity to pray with people who had no other link with the church, would you be even more interested?

What is a Nurse?

When you think of a nurse, you are probably imagining someone in a uniform in a hospital wielding a syringe or an enema. But the practice of nursing, as Florence Nightingale would have defined it,

is so very much more than that. It is a leadership role, identifying concerns that affect our health and daily living activities, and finding ways to address them; educating people towards the prevention of all kinds of disease and potential complications, and promoting wellness. It involves referring to appropriate health practitioners, as well as recruiting and training volunteers to assist people in need with various daily tasks. It is not only practiced in an institutional context but in homes and communities for the whole cycle of life.

Nurses understand health as being something more than the search for physical cures or the absence of disease. They see it as a dynamic process towards wholeness, involving physical, mental, social, spiritual and environmental factors.

Wholeness for Christians

Wholeness is a key biblical concept, derived from Hebrew thought. It brings together body, mind and spirit, in the context of community and relationship to God. This is clearly demonstrated in the Old Testament laws, the Psalms and the wisdom literature, as well as through the voice of the prophets. It is evident in the ministry of Jesus as He addressed a person's spiritual state at the same time as healing their illnesses, and instructed others to do the same (Matt. 10:8). And it is continued in the mission of the early church as they preached the gospel alongside healing activities (Luke 10:2-3, 9; Acts 5:16).

¹ Solari-Twadell, P.A. and Ziebarth, D.J., (eds) *Faith Community Nursing*. Springer, Switzerland, 2020. p 140.

There was a time before contemporary health services became comprehensively available when it was common for churches to have a health and healing focus. Monks and nuns would care for the sick, deaconesses trained as nurses before theological studies, and London had “Bible nurses,” who carried the Scriptures in their medical bags.² But in the 20th century in Western nations, the healing work of the church gradually became less prominent, as state and private funders took over. Even when those private health organizations had a Christian foundation, they became largely separate from the local church.

Faith Community Nursing

Contemporary Faith Community nursing, also known as Parish nursing, began in Chicago in 1986, when hospital chaplain Granger Westberg began to realize both the health potential and spiritual value of assigning a Christian nurse to a church’s ministry team. These nurses would do home visits on request, run clinics to check for high blood pressure and diabetes, make referrals, identify resources, teach health education topics with the congregation, train volunteers and above all, offer to pray with people when appropriate. As registered nurses they would practice in line with their nursing code of conduct, ensuring confidentiality, adequate documentation and promotion of safe-guarding. Their work would vary according to the needs of the client group that the church identified, but they were to have a specific focus on spiritual care. That would include discussion about faith where requested, but would also address issues like purpose in life, relationships with family and friends, identity, forgiveness, hope and the search for peace, all of which are relevant to maintaining good health.

A training program commenced, from which today’s 36.5 hour “Foundations” course for registered nurses has developed. It is available in America through the Westberg Institute for Faith Community Nursing, and there is now an international version being taught in at least 12 other countries.³ It is therefore eminently scalable and reproducible.

² Prochaska F.K, Body and soul: Bible nurses and the poor in Victorian London. *Hist Res.* 1987;60(143):336-48

³ The Westberg Institute for Faith Community Nursing. www.westberginstitute.org

There are now several thousand Faith Community nurses attached to churches and at work in the world, in many different denominations. This is not just in Western nations. Many of these nurses work one or two days a week with the church, alongside a part-time role with other health providers. When they come across a client whose interest in spiritual things is growing and who would like to know more about Christianity, an invitation can be offered to attend a group exploring faith, or a contact name given for further discussion.

What are the Missional Outcomes?

My own interest in this practice developed because as a nurse I believed that people needed more than physical or mental health care, and as a Baptist minister I could see that people often needed physical or mental health care alongside the spiritual care that I was able to offer. Having founded the ministry of Parish nursing in the UK in the hope that it would enhance the mission of the church in a very secular context, I wanted to discover whether or not it had truly made a difference. That turned into a doctoral study that has been published in book form.⁴ Fifteen churches with a Parish nursing service were compared to 77 churches without that ministry. The findings were significant. In the Parish nurse churches:

- 1 ministry team members and church-goers spent more time on behalf of the church with people who did *not* attend church.
- 2 congregation members offered significant volunteering time around the health initiative.
- 3 the range of missional activities undertaken by staff and congregation together was broadened, not only in the realm of physical health, but across the board, in mental health, community health and spiritual health interventions.
- 4 there was greater engagement with other voluntary and statutory bodies, increasing the profile of the church within the community.

⁴ Wordsworth, H.A., *Rediscovering a Ministry of health; Parish Nursing as a Mission of the Local Church*, Wipf and Stock, Eugene, Oregon, 2015.

5 all fifteen ministers said that the mission work of their church had been enhanced, and 12 of them strongly agreed with this statement.

6 there was evidence of an intrinsically integrated form of outreach taking place in the work of the Parish nurse. This last point is of particular interest, because many of the outreach activities undertaken by churches and church-planters do not intrinsically integrate prayer and spiritual care with the individual or group social action being offered.

Similar findings have been recently shown in the Parish Nursing Ministries UK impact report, 2021:⁵

Twenty-seven churches submitted returns for 2021, showing an average of 450 service users each. Of these, 150 service users were not regular church attenders (that is, attending less than once a month). There were 75 churches with Parish nursing services altogether, so if all the services had similar numbers, the number of people benefitting would be 33,000, of which one third would not be regular attenders. A similar ratio has been seen in the statistics from previous years.

Those who have taken the step of becoming Faith Community Nurses or Parish nurses often testify that it has involved a real sense of God's call and they wished they had known about it earlier.

But does the work of a Parish nurse result in people being introduced to Jesus Christ? Yes, there have definitely been reports of this happening and of baptisms and new church members. However, in the UK, the nursing code of conduct prevents nurses talking about faith or politics in inappropriate ways, so great care is taken to ensure that vulnerable


people are not pressured in any way. Rather, it is often the love and care and prayer shared by the church through the Parish nurse ministry that draws people to explore their relationship with God.

A Variety of Demographics

Parish nurses work in all kinds of contexts. Guided by the strategy of the local church, some focus on one particular demographic, for example, homeless people in cities, older people in a rural area, immigrants/refugees or families in a newbuild area. Church-planters with those demographics in view would do well to link up with a Parish nurse in order to connect with the community they are trying to reach.



Do you know any Christian nurses? Why not introduce them to this concept? Those who have taken the step of becoming Faith Community Nurses or Parish nurses often testify that it has involved a real sense of God's call and they wished they had known about it earlier. Although it has brought them new challenges, it has become the kind of nursing that has more than fulfilled their expectations and brought much joy.

Everyone has health needs. Could this be a way for church leaders to connect with more people in your community of interest? Could this become a key strategy for church planting among Unreached People Groups? 

⁵ Parish Nursing Ministries UK impact report, 2021. Available through contact via www.parishnursing.org.uk