

What is Parish Nursing?

Parish nursing. What is that? This is a question I have answered numerous times. Who are we? What do we do? Where do we work?

I am a parish nurse educator at Concordia University Wisconsin, and have had the privilege of serving RNs and nursing students who wish to become parish nurses. So let me begin to share this exciting career path from graduate nurse to parish nurse. Simply stated, a parish nurse, also called faith community nurse, is a registered nurse who serves a church or parish in a volunteer or paid position.

Most often, parish nurses are connected to a congregation, serving in a variety of ways, promoting health for the whole person. Parish nurses act as health educators, personal health counselors, health advocates, referral agents, coordinators of volunteers and integrators of faith and wellness. We practice nursing on an independent level under

the standards of faith community nursing and licensure in our states.

In health care today, we are sensitive to how our patients are affected on a holistic level. For example, nurses understand that breast cancer not only affects a woman on a physical level, but it significantly affects her spirit, mind and interpersonal relationships. As we try to meet the health care needs of all people, we have begun to use the church as a base for health care. Parish nurses assist members in their physical, emotional and spiritual well being.

A study that I conducted on 82 parish nurses, revealed many activities that parish nurses participate in. For instance, 80 percent of parish nurses screen for hypertension on “*Blood Pressure Sundays*”. Others present

By Carol A. Lueders Bolwerk

educational workshops on health topics such as breast cancer, diabetes, bone health, depression, advance directives and the like. Fifty percent of those surveyed coordinated health fairs, bridging resources from the community to church members. They have hosted flu shot clinics and blood drives on a church site. Parish nurses have facilitated support groups for grief and weight loss. They counsel congregational members on medications, lifestyles, diagnostic tests to improve health and well-being. Visits to the homebound and members living in nursing homes comprise about 60 percent of parish nurses' activities.

With other volunteers, parish nurses have developed a team ministry approach to integrate faith and health. In meeting the holistic needs of parishioners in the spiritual realm, parish nurses listen, pray, conduct bible studies, give communion, read devotions, and help people through pain and suffering.

Nurses serving congregations is a relatively old concept being now revisited by many churches. Historically, parish nursing had its roots in Christianity. In the bible, Phoebe, a deaconess, is often considered the first parish nurse. After becoming a follower of Jesus Christ, she opened her home to care for the sick (Romans 16: 1-2). Furthermore, nursing schools teach that nurses should minister to the spiritual as well as the physical needs. We, as health care workers, are simply meeting our mission—caring for all people on a holistic level.

Since the 1960s, several factors have pushed parish nursing to the forefront of church ministries. Short hospital stays, changing family structure, an aging population, rising insurance costs and increasing numbers of chronic illnesses have had an impact on families and communities. Many patients are discharged prematurely from hospitals. Where can a family receive more help? Churches have recognized this situation and have developed different ministries to help meet the health needs of their members. Parish nursing and congregational health programs are increasing in number, and help people stay out of the hospital, teach new mothers in meeting

the needs of their newborns, care for the elderly, teach illness prevention, promote health behaviors, and the like. In short, parish nurses are dedicated to the wellness of individuals, families, congregations, and communities. We develop health and wellness programs to holistically care for people from cradle to grave.

Volunteer or paid, nurses care for their congregations. Our service to the community is often based on our personal and professional experiences. For instance, I have worked in trauma and intensive care nursing. With vast



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experience in these areas, I easily transfer that experience and knowledge to educational seminars on chest pain and cardiac disease for members of the church. With a PhD in women's studies, I have conducted many presentations on bone health, breast cancer, infertility, and other women's topics. I live on a vegetable farm and during the month of October, I teach young people about nutrition when they visit our pumpkin fields. When my sons entered school, I joined the science curriculum committee and I continue to teach health topics to children.

Various training programs exist to prepare parish nurses and others to take

their place in congregational health ministries. Most range from 30 to 40-hour courses offered by universities in the nursing or theology departments, medical centers, hospitals, and interfaith institutions. A recent web search found a total of 135 programs listed in 39 states by the International Parish Nurse Resource Center (www.parishnurses.org). Several programs offer distance learning options. If you are interested in parish nurse education; you can easily gain access to parish nurse courses.

Since 1989, Concordia University Wisconsin has offered parish nurse courses. We have taught some 3,000 nurses across the United States, Canada, Africa, and Australia. The program makes a difference to congregations and communities in assisting individuals to maintain their health.

Content in parish nursing courses evolve around the roles of health educator, personal health counselor, integrator of faith and health, health advocate, referral agent, support group facilitator and coordinator of volunteers. Additionally, courses focus on the history and philosophy of faith community nursing, assessment, legal implications, team ministry, and documentation.

Parish nurses address important needs in the lives of many people. In the vocation you have chosen, doors will be opened to serve in many different areas. Parish nursing may be the one door you walk through. ☺



Since 1987, **Carol A. Lueders Bolwerk, PhD, RN**, has served as professor of nursing at Concordia University Wisconsin. Currently, she is the director for the BSN completion program and parish nurse ministries. She

has given numerous presentations on parish nursing, and has taught over 1,000 students for this specialty. Recently, Carol was a recipient of the Champion's Award for Women's Health in Parish Nursing from the Wisconsin Women's Foundation. Contact Dr. Carol at carol.lueders.bolwerk@cuw.edu for more information on this nursing specialty.