

Ministry of Health and Wholeness

Susan Naylor

A Parish Nursing Program

It's 10:30 on a Wednesday morning and it's shaping up as a usual day. That is, a usual day as a parish nurse serving Centenary United Methodist Church, a mid-size congregation in the city of St. Louis. So far this morning I've dealt with the health concerns of several members: hypertension, mental illness, heart disease and constipation. I've confirmed the arrangements for our monthly van trip to a local nursing home, where the pastor and I will visit twelve of our members and a group of six neighbors will visit several more. The biggest challenge so far today has been assisting a woman who lives in another state to arrange for the long-term care of her elderly father, another of our members, as he recovers from his sixth heart attack.

Each of these people is looking for something. They are looking for information, guidance, expertise, prayer, concern and connection. Even more than that, they are looking for a way to make sense of what is happening in their lives. They are looking for health and wholeness. It is significant that they are looking for it in their faith community.

Health promotion and disease prevention have a venerable history in the Methodist tradition, going back to John Wesley and his practical guide for health, *A Primitive Physick, or An Easy and Natural Method of Curing Most Diseases*. First published in 1747, no frontier home was complete without it. It contained a wealth of home remedies and practical advice on healthy living habits. Wesley's work marked a return to the early church practice of ministering to the whole person. His guide reflected his belief in the relationship among physical well being, mental health, and spiritual health. This whole-person concept or wholistic model of caring is once again finding its way back into the life of faith communities in the form of health ministry; one model of health ministry is parish nursing.

Modern parish nursing developed out of the work of a Lutheran pastor, Rev. Granger Westberg in Park Ridge, Illinois, in the early 1980s. Its roots, of course, go

back to the early church and the work of deaconesses, monks and nuns down through the ages to nurture and promote health and healing. Today parish nursing is recognized as an advanced practice and specialized area of the nursing profession, but it is only beginning to be recognized as a call from God to a specific form of ministry as well, that of pastoral care. John Patton in his text, *Pastoral Care in Context*, describes pastoral care as "the person to person response that grows out of participation in a caring community, and which seeks to enable persons to give and receive care and to experience community." This is the very essence of health ministry—accompanying each other on the journey toward wholeness and truly caring for the Body of Christ. One definition of a parish nurse's mission is to care for the health of a congregation and its community in body, mind and spirit. It is a ministry of presence, one of "seeing, hearing and being" every bit as much as one of "knowing and doing." "The Service of Word and Table" is as important for health ministry as blood pressure screenings and hospital visits.

Health ministry is too big a job to do alone. It is usually guided by a Health Cabinet and supported by groups of volunteers, a practice known as "multiplying the ministers." An excellent example of



this is the Wesley Nurse Program in the South West Conference in Texas, where Wesley Nurses are teaching and empowering people to do whole-person health promotion in their congregations and communities.

There are definite pitfalls along the way that can be avoided with proper preparation, care . . . and a whole lot of prayer. This article can serve only as the briefest of introductions to the concepts of health ministry and caring communities, but there are excellent resources available to learn more. I highly recommend two slim volumes: *The Health Cabinet: How to Start a Wellness Committee in Your Church* and *The Parish Nurse: Providing a Minister of Health for Your Congregation*. For more detail, see *Parish Nursing: Promoting Whole Person Health Within Faith Communities*. All are available from The International Parish Nurse Resource Center, 205 W. Touhy, Suite 124, Park Ridge IL 60068 (1-800-556-5368). You can reach the Wesley Nurse Program through Marian Perez at (210) 692-0759. □

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