

“Parish Nursing – Compassion in a Community Context”

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The realm of parish nursing, whereby a nurse is integrated into a faith community is a burgeoning field in community health. Competent in both the languages of medicine and spirituality, the parish nurse is able to focus on the whole person to emphasize wellness, disease prevention and health promotion, including healthy spirituality. Furthermore, given cutbacks in the medical system, getting attention from a health professional is increasingly difficult unless one is seriously ill. A parish nurse can step into this vacuum of care. Especially in resource-poor communities, where such barriers to access to care are the greatest, parish nursing can be an effective tool towards promoting community health.

To better understand the role and function of parish nurses today, I conducted a series of interviews with leaders in parish nursing from both Duke Divinity School in Durham, NC and Methodist Healthcare Ministries of South Texas, Inc (MHM) in San Antonio. I found significant and creative variations on the model of parish nursing in both settings, embodied by Duke’s “Congregational Health Ministries” and MHM’s “Wesley Nurse Program”.

The parish-nursing model capitalizes upon an interdisciplinary team, encompassing nurses, physicians, clergy, and many others. People can be ‘ministers of health’ in the capacity of educators, advocacy, or simply plain volunteers. Wesley Nursing Health Ministries offers a practical look at a non-profit that has managed to provide sustainable community-based, effective care that not only educates but also motivates people to make behavioral changes needed to live healthy lives. Based on a theology of caring, churches have a natural interest in the health of their congregation and the wider community, and a parish-nursing program provides avenues in meaningful community outreach activity.