

"He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." Micah 6:8

Parish Nursing - Compassion in a Community Context

Camille Ratliff

International and Comparative Studies, Global Health Certificate, Duke University

"What is a parish nurse? A friend... based in a faith community that you can call on for help in health care." (JPMRC, 2007)

Introduction

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".

Interview Format

While there is some excellent literature on parish nursing, most of it is directed towards those who wish to start a parish nursing in a congregation. To address a broader range of issues, and to look at specific programs in-depth, 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.

Physical description of parish nursing program, activities of parish nurse

- ‡ Describe the congregation/ community served
- ‡ Describe professional staff (how many, what fields?)
- ‡ How did you become involved in parish nursing?
- ‡ Can you comment on how the specific parish-nursing program you are affiliated with began?

How and why parish nurse program works

- ‡ Who has most authority? Responsibility? How is it shared?
- ‡ Boundaries between team members/ roles, how do complement you each other?

Relation of parish nursing to community

- ‡ What do you see as your greatest role? The role of parish nursing in communities?
- ‡ Describe kinds of communities served.
- ‡ Specific things the parish nursing program accomplishes.

Theology and Nursing (Theory)

- ‡ From your experience, what are the theological underpinnings of the parish nurse program and, as you experience it, how does theology influence it?
- ‡ Comment on other conceptual underpinnings that play a role in the development of parish nursing

What is parish nursing? The basics

- ‡ **Past:** Born from efforts by Granger Westberg in the 1970s and 1980s around wellness centers in churches.
- ‡ **Context:** Part of the larger field of health ministry, which is "the intentional practice of caring for one another within the distinct context of a faith tradition" (Packets)
- ‡ **Holistic Approach:** address body, mind, and spirit (Oates)
- ‡ **Practice:** Independent professional nurse provider. The parish nurse is not usually a provider of medical care, except when under doctor's orders or in emergency circumstances. (Breisch) The parish nurse is a "health professional within health ministry" (Phillips)
- ‡ **Training:** All parish nurses are registered nurses with current licensure. Many schools of nursing now offer curriculum in parish nursing (eg Health and Nursing Ministries Program, Duke University)
- ‡ **Interdisciplinary:** The nurse acts as a "hub," connecting people and needs from various disciplines (Breisch). The nurses' familiarity with "science and spirit serves as a dual qualification" for health prevention (Davis).



Figure adapted from "Parish Nursing," Maidstone Road Baptist Church, June 18 2008 -<http://www.mrbctelxstonew.org.uk/pnl.jpg>

Figure 1. Parish Nurses wear many hats. Granger Westberg, the father of parish nursing, outlined seven functions for the parish nurse: *health educator, personal health counselor, referral source, developer of support groups, facilitator and teacher of volunteers, integrator of faith and health, and health advocate*. This map shows examples of how the parish nurse can take on each role.

Conclusion

Through the interviews, it became apparent that the meta-organization is very useful to negotiate the building of infrastructure for a parish nursing health ministry program. This is especially helpful for questions of funding, and questions of liability, two common concerns in the practice of parish nursing.

Funding: The Caring Community Program uses its power as a network and as a resource-finder in order to connect individual parish nursing programs with potential funding sources. The Wesley Nurses Health Ministry Program is very fortunate indeed to have a stable source of income. As a half-owner of the Methodist Healthcare System, MHM has sufficient funds to keep a large-scale, salaried parish nurse program sustained, as well as support other community health initiatives in the area.

Liability: All Wesley Nurses all receive the same training on confidentiality procedures and use the same documentation. As an employee of MHM, the Wesley Nurse is covered by their liability policy. Both Caring Communities and MHM provide a support and counsel for parish nurses, congregations member, or other parties who may have a question about liability or confidentiality. Caring Communities can assist congregations and other groups in questions of insurance and liability.

The parish-nursing model seems to be an effective way of promotion of whole person health through a faith community. Modern trends have shown that many people from various disciplines can be 'ministers of health' in the capacity of educators, advocacy, or simply plain volunteers.

Literature cited

International Parish Nurse Resource Center. (2007). About Parish Nursing. Retrieved Nov 8, 2007, from <http://www.ipnrc.org/>

<http://www.parishnurses.org/>

Solari-Twadell, P. A., & McDermott, M. A. (Eds.). (1998). *Parish Nursing: Promoting Whole Person Health Within Faith Communities*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Vandecreek, L., & Mooney, S. (Eds.) (2002). *Parish Nurses, Health Care Chaplains, and Community Clergy: Navigating the Maze of Professional Relationships*. New York: The Haworth Press.

Acknowledgments

I thank all of my interview participants - Anne Packett and Alyson Breisch at Duke University, Pilar Oates and Roy Phillips at Methodist Health Ministries of South Texas, and Judy Davis of Laurel Heights United Methodist Church in San Antonio for sharing with me their experiences and stories as experts in the field of parish nursing. I am also indebted for their generous feedback and support. I also thank Keith Meador at Duke for helping guide me, and for Wendy Cadge at Brandeis for pointing me in the right direction. Also a big thanks to the great people at PhDPosters.com for printing this in record time!

For further information

Please contact camille.ratliff@duke.edu. More information on this field can be obtained at The International Parish Nurse Resource Center, <http://www.ipnrc.org/>. More information about Wesley Nurse Health Ministries can be found at Methodist Healthcare Ministries' website, <http://www.methodisthealthcare.org/>. Finally, more information about health ministry and Caring Communities at Duke can be found at <http://caringcommunities.mc.duke.edu/FAQ.htm>



Organizational features

Wesley Nursing Health Ministries, Methodist Healthcare Ministries (MHM)



- ‡ Administered by MHM, a 501(c)(3), not for profit, faith-based organization and San Antonio's largest non-public funding source for community healthcare. MHM is one-half owner of the Methodist Healthcare System.
- ‡ Wesley Nurses are selected, trained, and salaried by MHM, but they enter into a true partnership in the faith community (Oates)
- ‡ Reach: service area extends to over 70 counties in the Southwest Texas conference area of the United Methodist Church
- ‡ Wesley Nurses have standing orders from doctors to provide minimally invasive medical care, such as blood sticks
- ‡ Capitalizes on role of nurse as health professional in order to increase access to care for underserved populations
- ‡ Interfaith: Although affiliated with the United Methodist Church, Wesley Nurses need not be Methodist (or even Christian) themselves. Interfaith spiritual training allows Wesley Nurses to prepare themselves to meet the patient where he/she is spiritually at, regardless of religious practice

Caring Communities Program, Duke Divinity School



- ‡ Helps churches, communities, hospitals, and healthcare systems develop infrastructure for parish nursing programs
- ‡ "parish nursing consultant" (Packets)
- ‡ Negotiate and communicate liability issues
- ‡ Provide resources for locating funds for new and old programs
- ‡ Educates churches and communities about starting a health ministry or parish nursing program

A day in the life...

Laurel Heights Youth Center: Born from a partnership with the San Antonio Youth Council, YMCA, and Laurel Heights United Methodist Church, the then-current parish nurse began an after-school community center for at-risk teens. They enter into it not only kept the teens away from dangerous social situations, but also provided a venue in which to give health education to the parents of the youth. (Judy Davis)

Brown Bag Lunches: Congregation members were asked to bring their prescription medication in a paper bag to a church luncheon. Over lunch, a pharmacist talked with them about how to take pills properly and the side effects of different medications. (Alyson Breisch)

Confidentiality awareness: Because someone with good intentions could accidentally reveal too much about a person's disease in a prayer list or similar format, it is important to educate the friends and family of the person with an illness, since they are those who would be most likely to put the patient's name on the prayer list. (Alyson Breisch)

