

PARISH NURSE ROLES

The Parish Nurse is a health educator, personal health counselor, a source for referral to church and community resources, a teacher and coordinator of volunteers, a developer of support groups, an advocate and an interpreter of the close relationship between faith and health. The Parish Nurse has a unique opportunity to work with individuals, families and groups throughout all stages of life and at every socio-economic level.

A. Interpreter of the Close Relationship Between Faith and Health

The Parish Nurse, in conjunction with the pastoral team, lay leaders, and the health cabinet, seeks to help the congregation re-identify, re-interpret, re-discover and re-claim its historic role in the area of health and well-being. Parish Nurses have chosen this specialized ministry because of the unique opportunity to work with individuals and families to discover the deeper beliefs and values that affect their health and to more effectively participate in the life of the congregation. The sacraments, liturgy, and symbols used in the church enhance not only worship but also a deeper understanding of a faith tradition. It is through the faith tradition, the health ministry, the development of a sense of community and opportunities for service and spiritual growth that health and healing take place in one's life.

B. Health Educator

The Parish Nurse seeks to raise the health awareness of the parish community and to foster an understanding of the relationship between lifestyle, personal habits, attitudes, faith and well-being. Through a variety of formats – seminars, conferences, classes, workshops, small discussion groups, individual sessions, newsletters, printed educational materials, and bulletin boards – the Parish Nurse empowers individuals to become more active partners in the management of their personal health resources. In addition, the Parish Nurse seeks to promote actions by parishioners related to:

- Care of the environment
- Accessibility of worship space
- Responsibility to each others, surrounding community and society as a whole.

The nurse supplements her own teaching with programs that feature qualified speakers from medicine, public health, physical therapy, social work, nutrition and psychology, as well as ethics and theology. Physicians from the congregation who have never been asked to speak on their own specialties have been pleased to participate in this aspect of church life.

Programs are offered for all age groups and represent a wide range of topics. A program was given for young children, "Your Body, God's Gift," which coincided with events of the calendar year. For example, a discussion of the skeletal system occurred during Halloween and the cardiovascular system was discussed during the Valentine season. Some of the other topics have included "Safe Snow Shoveling," "The 'Sandwich' Generation," "Give Your Medicine Cabinet a Yearly Cleanup," "Low-Fat Cooking," and "Wellness Is Ageless." While information on many of these topics can be found in books and other publications, the unique contribution of the Parish Nurse lies in the way he or she integrates a broader, whole-person context into the subject matter.

Bulletin boards and newsletters are a good means to provide useful information to the whole congregation. Bulletin boards may be dedicated to single topics, such as the living will and durable power of attorney for health care, or may include brief items on a variety of health related topics.

The bulletin board is also a good place to post a schedule of screening events, such as a blood pressure screening. Likewise the Parish Nurse may initiate her own newsletter or contribute a column to the church's regular newsletter. Topics in the newsletter may follow a theme, describe seasonal health concerns, or publicize the schedule of health-related events in the church. It may be helpful to follow *National Health Observances*, published yearly by the local Health Departments, which details months, weeks, or days devoted to promoting particular health concerns.

C. Personal Health Counselor

The Parish Nurse is available to all parishioners to discuss personal health problems, to recommend medical intervention when necessary, and to make hospital and nursing home visits.

Parishioners get to know the Parish Nurses as they mingle with the people in many different social settings or as they take blood pressure readings after weekly services. Appointments are often made in an informal manner – a parishioner asks, “Could I talk to you sometime.”

Experience has shown that the largest group of people to approach the Parish Nurse has been the elderly. Their problems typically related to medications, difficulties communicating with their doctors, and the need for someone to help them cope with the complicated health care system. Other topics of concern to the elderly include living arrangements, family relationships, memory sharpening, the aging process, safety in the home, sleep disorders, depression, and incontinence. Through these interactions Parish Nurses have become aware of profound loneliness and isolation of many elderly parishioners.

Another group to seek the Parish Nurse's counsel is parents of children and teenagers who are concerned about their relationship with their children and their children's possible use of alcohol and other drugs, their sexuality, and eating disorders. This group of adults who are concerned about their children are often dealing simultaneously with issues and concerns related to their aging parents.

Some of the issues raised by women include menopause, estrogen replacement therapy, osteoporosis, mammography, relationships, domestic violence, and substance abuse.

Men, particularly those over 40, comprise another distinct group of clients. They may present their problem initially as a physical one. However, this can simply be their “ticket of admission.” Once the headache or backache has been dispatched, they stay to talk about their careers, personal relationships, and parenting concerns. In Parish Nurses, men find health professionals who are scientifically trained, have seen some of the challenges of life, and are good listeners.

The Parish Nurse also visits parishioners in hospitals or their homes after they have had major diagnostic tests, treatment or surgical procedures. The Parish Nurse collaborates with other health care professionals after hospitalization and assesses ways in which she and the congregation can support the individual and family. The Parish Nurse can assist parishioners to live safely and in comfort in their homes, and the Parish Nurse and Pastor are able to help individuals and families in making end-of-life decisions.

Minor health problems, when detected early, can be prevented from developing into major illnesses. The visibility and availability of a Parish Nurse help parishioners recognize, acknowledge, and seek treatment for symptoms they might otherwise have ignored or

denied. In a comfortable and supportive atmosphere, individuals may begin to explore the relationship between their lifestyle, unresolved spiritual concerns (such as guilt and forgiveness) and health problems.

D. Referral Agent and Liaison with Congregational and Community Resources

The Parish Nurse draws on health-related resources from families, the congregation, and the community and often advocates on behalf of the parishioner with these agencies or groups. These include referrals to physicians, self-help groups, federal, provincial, or community agencies, food pantries, shelters and housing, nursing homes, retirement facilities, hospitals, legal and financial counselors, psychotherapists, home care and elder care specialists. Congregational resources may include communion visitors and/or volunteers to provide transportation, meals, cards, or visits and support.

The complexity of the health care system may overwhelm the average person, and Parish Nurses can help keep their parishioners from getting lost in the system. Parishioners have reported that they are tremendously grateful to the Parish Nurses for opening doors to many types of care they did not know existed.

E. Multiplying the Ministers

(1) Teacher and Coordinator of Volunteers

The Parish Nurse collaborates with all congregational structures already in place. The Parish Nurse serves as a clinical resource and support person to parishioners, who broaden and extend the sources of help within the parish. The Parish Nurse may guide parishioners to reach out, for example, to individuals who have recently sustained a loss or to families attempting to care at home for a family member recently discharged from the hospital. The services needed and provided are as varied as the human needs encountered. Along with serving as a clinical resource for volunteers, Parish Nurses may conduct follow-up assessments with individuals and assist with referrals. Educating and coordinating volunteers facilitates the number of “health ministers” in the congregation.

(2) Developer of Support Groups

Support Groups are developed to address specific concerns such as illness, spiritual life, care giving, weight loss, smoking cessation and bereavement. The Parish Nurse may be aware of individuals in the congregation who share a health concern or may learn about them from congregational health surveys. Facilitating a meeting to discuss the development of a support group provides an opportunity for interested persons to discuss their needs and decide upon the form the group will take including such matters as leadership, goals, location, time and frequency of meetings. The Parish Nurse provides leadership in facilitating the development of support groups and may sometimes lead the group. In most cases, however, the group members are encouraged to assume ownership for the group’s management and direction and the Parish Nurse functions as a resource person who can provide educational materials and other forms of background support.

F. Health Advocate

The Parish Nurse can assist parishioners to navigate the Health Care System. The Parish Nurse's goal is to empower parishioners to make informed health care decisions and to assist them to find the services they need. In guiding the parishioner, the Parish Nurse may speak out to help obtain needed health services. The Parish Nurse is able to use her specialized knowledge to assist parishioners to interpret medical language or understand medical conditions and to express themselves when visiting the physician. A Parish Nurse's advocacy role may also include empowering the congregation to work toward changing government policies that negatively impact the health of the congregation and community and/or creating new public policy to ensure a healthy future.

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