

THE UNIQUENESS OF PARISH NURSING

One of the most frequent questions asked of those working in the Parish Nurse Ministry is: *How is it unique? How is it different from other community nursing?* It is an important question, and a basic one for the development and implementation of parish nursing. The following addresses this vital question:

Contexts

If real benefits are to accrue to a community from parish nursing, we must first examine and understand the contexts in which such a concept can truly grow and flourish:

1. The church context
2. The essence of health and healing context, and
3. The team/partnership context.

1. CHURCH CONTEXT

While theoretical and conceptual language is often used to describe the ministry, it is in fact intended to be very practical. Within the larger picture, it is the civilization, the society, and the community that parish nursing wants to help preserve, not the church. At the same time, however, it is important to clarify the perspective of the ministry. While it has no intention of proselytizing, the lens through which it looks is Christian – in theology, history, narrative and experience. Christianity provides its deepest roots and commitment, acknowledging its debt to Judaism.

2. THE ESSENCE OF HEALTH AND HEALING CONTEXT

The essence of parish nursing at its core, at its very centrality, is faith which involves commitment to reflect on and live from the gifts of God: trust, love and truth, hope, wisdom and the timeless values which enable individuals to experience healing and achieve wellness. Parish nursing attempts to tap these resources of faith and tie them to the current practice of community health and healing. This is what parish nursing is about at its most basic level – the level of faith. Faith makes it unique!

While these immense cultural changes have provided opportunity for deeper reflection on the nature of health and healing, they also have created uncertainty among those receiving care and professional health care givers about how the many threads of the complex web of care fit together. Increasingly, two things at least are apparent. The first is that in practice some sort of shared collaborative integrative approach must be worked out among the care-givers. The second is that the church, one of the vital threads in the complex web of care, must rediscover and reclaim its role as a health and healing place in society. Since the local congregation/parish is already the focus of community activity and support, it is appropriate that it should also become the primary site for collaborative church health ministry.

3. TEAM/PARTNERSHIP CONTEXT

If we are to make a difference in preserving this society, so in need of radical healing, we must begin to build bridges to link the various professional islands – to work together in

an integrated and holistic fashion: nursing/medicine and religion, science and faith, body and spirit.

Benefits

Working within the context outlined, parish nursing is beneficial to the churches, the neighbourhood, the broader community and other nursing and health agencies if it achieves at least some of the following:

1. Awakens and reminds the churches of the central function of their tradition: love and healing, the drawing together to share the common task of caring.
2. Draws attention to the churches' relationship to the community and its role as an agency of health. There is a substantial precedent in the principle of teamwork between religion and health, associated with the origin of the hospice movement in England. The difference between the two is one of focus. Whereas the hospice focus is palliative care, the parish nurse focus is prevention.
3. Broadens the definition of caring and healing to include areas of human experience such as forgiveness and hope.
4. Amplifies definitions of sickness and diagnostic language to include a\spiritual conditions, such as loneliness, despair, fear, and meaninglessness. In the most basic practical sense this means spending quality time with people: listening, encouraging, supporting, counseling, etc.
5. Expands the boundaries of health beyond the focus on sickness to one of prevention and wellness. And it supports the subsequent shift in attitude and expectation of care from over dependence on extraneous sources to one of personal responsibility for one's own well-being.
6. Incorporates into its ministry the redemptive potential of suffering – a shift in attitude and behavior from seeing suffering as something alien, something to run from, to the discovery of a transforming experience, one of healing and hope. Thus, one of the depths one may uncover previously unknown spiritual and personal resources and begin to take responsibility for one's own health and healing.
7. Helps identify and respond to those places in society where the public system fails and people, unnoticed, fall through the cracks: those people with insufficient income to pay costs beyond health insurance coverage for prescribed drugs, supplementary nursing services, extra dietary needs, those without family, and others who have nowhere to turn.
8. Provides care-givers the context for theological reflection and personal spiritual nourishment with an opportunity for self growth and professional development.

Most of these benefits are not new; rather they are a very old way of bringing the rich Christian tradition of spiritual wealth into a troubled world.

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