

Parish nurses tend to congregations'

BODY & SOUL



ERIN STARKEBAUM/The Columbian

Parish nurse Marilyn Johnson watches Logan Baxter, 5, take his turn throwing a ball through the hoops during playtime at vacation Bible school. Parish nurses can play a key role in church activities and parishioner wellness.

A watchful eye in the pews proves a useful supplement to more-formal health care

By TOM VOGT
Columbian staff writer

Three people attending church at Trinity Lutheran in 2006 wound up in the emergency room.

Marilyn Johnson sent them to the hospital.

She started a parish nurse program at Trinity Lutheran four years ago as part of the church's health ministry. The job involves a lot of education, healthy-living programs and support activities.

But it can include hands-on nursing, like when the three congregation members walked up to Johnson during the year and told her they didn't feel well. She took their blood pressure.

DID YOU KNOW?

Parish nurses have seven roles:

- Integrator of faith and health at the parish level.
- Health educator, bringing information to the congregation.
- Personal health adviser, helping a person do research.
- Referral liaison who can point a person to community health resources.
- Trainer of volunteers, especially when working with a health ministry team.
- Developer of support groups in the congregation or referring people to community resources.
- Health advocate for people who don't know how to advocate for themselves.

— Sandy Madsen,
Northwest Parish Nurse Ministries

Nurses:

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"All three were hypertensive" — their high blood pressure amounted to a medical emergency — "and they went directly to the ER," Johnson said.

While that's not a typical day at the office for a parish nurse, "They're pretty common stories," said Sandy Madsen, education coordinator at Northwest Parish Nurse Ministries.

Johnson also identified seven people at blood-pressure screenings who needed to see their doctors the next day.

Johnson is now Southwest Washington coordinator for the Northwest Parish Nurse Ministries group. The Portland-based group supports more than 600 nurses and health ministries in Washington, Oregon, Alaska, Montana, Idaho, Wyoming and Northern California.

Sue Hoeffner has taken over as parish nurse at Trinity Lutheran, and Johnson is her backup.

They're both registered nurses — a requirement for the job. Hoeffner previously worked as a pediatric and neonatal nurse. Johnson was clinical manager of the cancer center at Southwest Washington Medical Center when she retired.

As parish nurses, they have wider responsibilities.

"The focus is the whole person," said Hoeffner. "It's a combination of mind, body and spirit. I try to incorporate



ERIN STARKEBAUM/The Columbian

Trinity Lutheran parish nurse Sue Hoeffner gives stickers to Roree Osborn, left, and Sarah Barnes, who both chose a fruit or vegetable for lunch. Rewarding healthy habits is one of the pleasures of parish nursing.

programs that reach all those areas."

Wellness in a crisis

"There are many phases of wellness, even when you're in the midst of a disease," Johnson said.

Trinity Lutheran provides support groups for people dealing with major issues, including loss and illness.

"I was diagnosed with a rare cancer in 1999," Jim Standiford said. "This is a wonderful support group."

Now he is part of a long-term cancer research project. "I'm a lab rat," Standiford said. A few days ago, "I had my 25th chemotherapy treatment on this. It takes a toll. Sue calls and asks how I'm doing."

Cheryl Standiford, his wife, is a two-time breast-cancer survivor. When chemotherapy

entered the conversation, "Marilyn was a godsend," Cheryl Standiford said.

Marlene Swanson recalled a similar experience.

"I was diagnosed with Stage IV ovarian and uterine cancer," Swanson said. Her reaction to the prospect of chemo was: "I can't."

"Marilyn said that was the first thing she'd do. I said, 'OK.'"

It's not just the nurses who have provided support during their illnesses.

"I don't know how I could survive without church," Swanson said.

"We care for each other," her husband, Dave Swanson said.

Ginni Christensen said the church's grief-support group is helping her cope with the loss of two family members.

The group "is an expression of the love of the church

family," Christensen said. "Sue knows what buttons to push. It's difficult to know that you will be crying, but tears relieve stress."

Another program looks at living a healthy life with a chronic condition.

"If you have cancer, diabetes, arthritis or a lung disease, you can't change that," Johnson said. "But you can prevent pain and anxiety from cascading. There is so much more to you than a disease."

Not just for seniors

Don't think that the older generation is the sole focus of the parish nursing program.

"It's a slam-dunk for seniors," Johnson said. But she pointed out that "My youngest hypertension catch was a 16-year-old."

A note in an AARP newsletter reinforced her concern for the youngest members of the congregation. It cited a study from the Federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention predicting that one out of every three children born in 2000 will become diabetic.

So when Hoeffner and Johnson made their plans for Trinity Lutheran's annual summer Bible school, it wasn't just about bandaging scraped knees at the first-aid station.

"We looked at the lunch menu," Johnson said. "We sent home exercise information."

Sometimes a parish nurse is just there to look or listen, as part of a ministry team visiting a home-bound church member.

"A nurse's eye can pick up something in a home setting," Madsen said.

Parish nurses aren't there to replace people in the health-care industry, but sometimes there is an informal relationship when an assignment ends.

"I've had home health nurses connect with me," Madsen said. "They want to refer their patient to a parish nurse: 'Can you follow up on this person? I'm worried.'"

Listening goes beyond lending a sympathetic ear.

"We can help them navigate the health-care maze," Hoeffner said.

Johnson recalled a church member who felt a bit intimidated about an upcoming trip to the doctor's office.

"We sat in the library after church, working on a script with a list of questions for the physician," Johnson said.

The Trinity Lutheran parish nurse program has wider community roles. The nurses get information from Clark County Public Health on timely topics like E. coli, West Nile virus and swimming safety, and forward it to families.

"We are a site for University of Portland nursing students," Hoeffner said. "They can be here for six weeks, working on community health."

While church members benefit from having a parish nurse available, the job has some particular payoffs.

"Those of us in parish nursing find it very satisfying," said Madsen, the regional education coordinator.

"You work at a personal level and follow them through. In acute care, you see a patient, and then you're done," Madsen said. "This is an ongoing relationship."