

THE HEAD BONE'S CONNECTED TO THE HEART BONE

PARISH NURSES AS TEACHERS

BY DEBORAH L. PATTERSON

The head bone's connected to the neck bone." That was about the extent of my medical training as a pastor and about the extent of the health education I was qualified to teach in the congregations I served. Yet the church is called to preach, teach, and heal. How are clergy and congregations doing with each of these? The church needs to integrate these activities – preaching must be more than sermons, teaching must be more than Sunday school, and healing must be more than calling 911 if someone faints.

Each member of a church leadership team can play an important part in this integration. Parish nurses, a relatively new addition to the staff of many congregations, can bring health wisdom to share with parishioners and the neighborhood. They know which bone is connected to the next. They also know that health is holistic. Each part of the body is connected to the heart. Each part of the body is connected to the spirit.

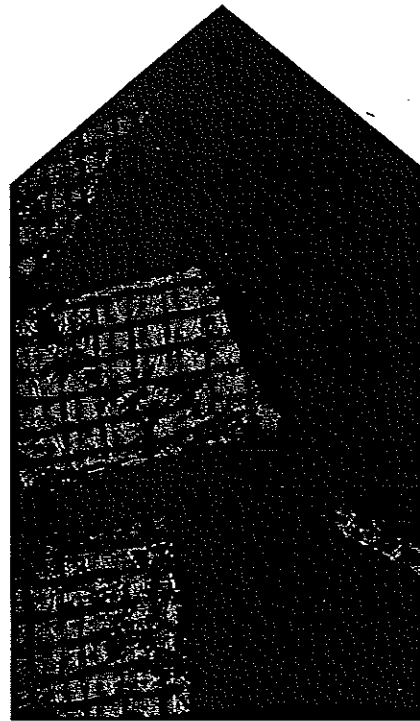
In the context of a faith community, parish nurses have different opportunities to participate in teaching. First of all, though, it might be helpful to take a quick look at parish nursing.

What Is Parish Nursing?

Parish nursing is a specialized area of nursing and ministry, in which registered nurses serve in congregations. Parish nurses are instrumental in facilitating the healing and health of that community, its individual members, and neighbors served by that faith community.

Parish nurses perform the following roles, each of which has a teaching component:

- *Integrator of Faith and Health.* Parish nurses assist parishioners to achieve



higher levels of wellness by fostering physical, emotional, spiritual, and social harmony – leading to healthy and healing relationships with God, family, congregations, culture, and creation.

- *Health Educator.* Parish nurses provide opportunities to learn about health issues, individually and in groups.
- *Health Counselor.* Parish nurses are available to discuss health concerns, emphasizing early response to small problems and encouraging healthy lifestyles.
- *Referral Advisor.* Upon request, parish nurses provide referrals to healthcare and social services within the community.

- *Health Advocate.* Parish nurses speak out to help obtain needed health-related services.
- *Developer of Support Groups.* Parish nurses facilitate the development of support groups for the congregation and others served.
- *Volunteer Coordinator.* Parish nurses recruit, prepare, and oversee congregational volunteers.

Particularly important among these roles is the role of health educator. There is a wide variety of settings in which teaching by parish nurses can occur in a congregation.

Teaching Settings

At first glance, the most obvious place for parish nurses to teach is through classes on health-related topics, and indeed such offerings abound. During the past year, the parish nurses who are members of the Deaconess Parish Nurse Ministries Network led or sponsored over 130 presentations on topics such as: CPR, first aid, parenting, nutrition, advanced directives, heart health, bike safety, West Nile virus, stress management, mental health, emergency preparedness, healthy aging, and organ donation, among many others. These presentations were sometimes offered as "stand-alone" classes, but often were part of other events, such as Women's Fellowship meetings or Vacation Bible School.

Like any other form of Christian education, health ministry education is often most powerfully communicated through personal example. The parish nurse needs to be aware that people are watching her (currently, most parish nurses are women, but there are growing

numbers of outstanding parish nurses who are men) to see if she practices what she preaches. The congregation will be watching to see if the parish nurse exercises, gets enough sleep, drinks water instead of soda, takes a vacation each year, and eats nutritious food. If she doesn't model taking good care of her own health, the parish nurse is unlikely to convince many others to change their personal health practices, no matter how many classes she offers.

One-on-One Teaching

Of course, parish nurses spend a significant amount of time one-on-one with individuals who have concerns about their health and need help gathering further information. Parish nurses reinforce the health education provided by physicians and other health professionals. They are able to do so without the time constraints that insurers place on other health professionals.

Let me share an example of where a parish nurse, through one-on-one teaching, could have made a difference in pre-

venting a health problem. Recently, an elderly woman in a congregation near our office received a pacemaker. The physician talked with her before her discharge from the hospital and went over instructions for follow-up care at home. She did not fully understand them, however, and did not realize that she would no longer need to take the same medications she was taking before the procedure. After returning home, she continued to take those medications, along with her new prescriptions, and became seriously ill. A parish nurse would have been able to visit the woman immediately upon her return home to be sure that she understood her new treatment protocol. With the parishioner's permission, the parish nurse even could have been with the woman when she met with the physician while she was still in the hospital or accompanied the

Teaching Moments for the Congregation

Some health education can be directed to the entire congregation. Here are some examples of opportunities for such health education:

- "Mission Moment." Share activities of the health ministry in the worship service. Remind people about upcoming health fairs, blood drives, and exercise programs. Make it appealing!
- *Inserts in the Bulletin.* This is a good place to publicize your health ministry events or to share brief health notes of interest. Good sources of health notes can be found online through sources such as the Mayo

Clinic's health information website at www.MayoClinic.com or the website for children and their parents sponsored by the Nemours Foundation at www.kidshhealth.org.

- *Articles in the Newsletter.* A recent survey we did of parishioners in over 100 churches with parish nurses found that the overwhelming majority read the articles by parish nurses in their church newsletters. Wonderful resources for materials to include can be found through free or inexpensive health newsletters such as the National Women's Health Resource Center "Health Report," the Johns Hopkins Medical Letter, the UC Berkeley Wellness Letter, and the Nutrition Action Healthletter of the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

- *Bulletin Board.* A bulletin board is a great place to highlight national health observances. They are easily found online through the National Health Information Center at <http://www.healthfinder.gov/library/nho/nho.asp>. Hang lots of colorful photos of people participating in fun health events, such as a Healthy Foods Potluck or a Walking Club. Use this space to inform people of current health issues in their area and what action they can take to help, such as writing a legislator.
- *Brochure Rack.* Care Notes from Abbey Press are a great resource. Also, many other organizations will provide free materials for you. Try the American Heart Association, the American Lung Association, and the American Diabetes Association, for example. Many of these organizations have materials especially designed for children that might be suitable for use in Sunday school or children's bulletins/worship hour packets.

The suggestions listed here are just the beginning. There are many other settings for teaching by parish nurses. In an article in the April issue of *The Clergy Journal*, I will address opportunities parish nurses have to be involved in the outreach ministries of congregations.

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