

Parish nursing: a compassionate bridge between science and theology

Elizabeth Beam

“THE INTEREST IN FAITH AND HEALTH is exploding, and with it, a huge increase in parish nursing,” said the Rev. Deborah Patterson, Executive Director of The International Parish Nurse Resource Center and facilitator of the 16th Annual Westberg Parish Nurse Symposium. This form of nursing is a nurturing of health within a particular church. Besides providing health guidance, the nursing also offers spiritual support.

The late Rev. Granger Westberg founded parish nursing in Illinois in the 1980s. This form of care is based on the deaconess movement of the early Christian Church. The word *deaconess*, which refers to a messenger, servant, or helper is based on the Greek word *diakonos*. Phebe, a woman worker in the early Christian community, is mentioned by the Apostle Paul in a capacity that is perhaps a forerunner of today's parish nurse.¹

These early caregivers saw the spiritual element as indispensable to the well-being of individuals, and this spiritual connection is obvious in today's parish nurses. Although parish nurses are Registered Nurses, this field of nursing doesn't involve “hands on” nursing care when they are on the staff of a church. They serve as resources and respond to the health concerns of the congregation and of people in the surrounding community while compassionately walking the spiritual journey with them.

One key message of the symposium, which was held last September in St. Louis, Missouri, is that parish nursing is a bridge between science and theology. It heralds the demand for a spiritual dimension in healthcare that applies to both patients and medical practitioners.

The two-and-a-half day symposium was sponsored by The International Parish Nurse Resource Center of St. Louis, which is the umbrella organization for worldwide parish nursing activities. The first day's pre-conference workshops and interactive presentations were meant to inspire nurses with the overall theme of “Compassionate Care.” While exploring grief, domestic violence, disability, implementing care teams in the congregation, supporting the elderly, or enriching one's own spiritual life, participants were encouraged to deepen the faith-based effectiveness of their ministry and to value its important work.

The worship service of prayer and singing that opened the conference focused on the Biblical theme “. . . what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?”² Attendants were encouraged to think of this as their only job description.

After this, the Granger Westberg family shared recollections and insights into the global vision held by the founder of this ministry. Westberg imagined that Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam as well as Chris-

tianity would embrace parish nursing because compassion is fundamental to all of them. The attendance of five nurses from New Zealand and a parish nurse program in Swaziland that began in 2001 and now has 21 nurses, gave evidence of the ministry's global reach.

After the next day's opening worship service, keynote speaker Barbara Dossey, Director of Holistic Nursing Consultants in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and author of *Florence Nightingale: Mystic, Visionary, Healer*, invited the nurses to look at Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) as a model for the parish nurse today and to ask how her legacy can be continued.

Dossey spoke passionately of Nightingale's many caring roles as visionary, healer, environmentalist, and reformer. She said that, "like Nightingale, we are involved in our own search for meaning and purpose." Dossey encouraged the nurses to look at the deep value of their work and to share it from the core of their experience.

Other presentations and workshops focused on the foundational compassion of parish nursing in dealing with crises, AIDS, end-of-life care, and burnout.

They included promoting the joy of spiritual growth, deepening the capacity for being a healing presence in the lives of others, and using storytelling as a healing tool.

Rev. Richard P. Ellerbrake, President Emeritus of Deaconess Health System in St. Louis and founder of the Deaconess Parish Nurse Ministries in St. Louis, explained how promoting good health and expressing compassion work together. He encouraged parish nurses to envision a broader role for themselves in the new millennium.

Rev. Ellerbrake said that the nurses face health issues that have to do with "life style, spirituality, environment, commitment to a generous and giving attitude . . . far more than is encompassed by the familiar, if inadequate, trinity of 'body, mind, and spirit.'" □

Liz Beam has been a Christian Science nurse for 16 years. She says that anyone interested in learning more about parish nursing can visit their website at www.parishnurses.org.

¹ See Rom. 16:1, 2. ² Mic. 6:8.

A PARISH NURSE SHARES GOD'S LOVE

MARY ANN BRISCHETTO smiles brilliantly each time she shares one of her deeply felt thoughts about parish nursing as we talked at her office in the church. She said at the conference, "It's the easiest thing in the world because it is the sharing of God's unconditional love. It's an incredible way to share nursing skills and education with respect for each one as the child of God."

Brischetto is a Roman Catholic who has been on the staff of a United Church of Christ in St. Louis for the last five years of her thirty-year nursing career. As part of her work, she participates in The Positive Family Program, which is breaking down walls in the community. She is just as likely to be praying in an alley as she works with gang members as she is to be bridging faith and health issues with parishioners.

Brischetto discussed what she might say when she's called by the police to go to someone's home. "Do you say you're a parish nurse?" she asked. "Nobody knows what that is. You are there be-

cause of God. Now do you say that when you are at the door? That's not what it's about. But if you have that purpose inside of you, and you're filled with that, then it just works. It doesn't matter what you call yourself."

When asked what prayer and staying inspired mean to her, Brischetto replied, "I start out my morning prayer doing a 'focus prayer,' which might begin with the affirmation 'God is . . . ' as in 'God is organized' since that might be what I need to work on that day. Or God is cool-headed." Brischetto said that she goes right to where God is and brings Him into whatever the need seems to be.

"What's essential for this ministry is to look inside yourself, because you are taking that whole person to everything you do," she said. "It's to remain pure in purpose—to not be afraid to share spirituality and have it be the bridge to everything you do."

E.B.