

Are You Ready? The Clergy and the Parish Nurse

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“This church, as the body of Christ, is called to be a community of health and healing in every level and location of its common life.”

Call to Healing and Wholeness

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Dear Pastor, are you ready to help these people?

- ♥ An elderly woman in your congregation passes out during the church service. The parish church member who accompanies her to the hospital discovers that she has stopped taking her diabetes medications because they cost so much. She wishes to just die.
- ♥ A woman asks your advice on her 80-year-old mother who also happens to be an active member of your church. Two weeks ago the elderly woman suffered an attack of diverticulitis that required surgery. She has been on a ventilator since and is only slightly responsive. She opens her eyes to a voice and tears form in her eyes. When asked if she wants to live, she does not respond. Her daughter wants to “do the right thing” for her mother and is not sure what that “right thing” might be.
- ♥ A young couple joins the church and enrolls their six-year-old daughter in the nursery school class. They tell you that she is “slow” and needs to be with younger children. She is much bigger than the 3 and 4-year-old children in the class. She hits them if they come too close and is preoccupied with anything that spins, her vocabulary is limited and she does not allow adults to touch her. She responds poorly to direction. The Sunday school staff is at their wits end to know how to care for her and the other children in the classroom.
- ♥ An elder on your session calls you at 2 AM. His mother has been injured in a fall at the nursing home where she resides. She’s on her way to the hospital ED via ambulance. Your elder doesn’t know who to call to help, as he and his family are 700 miles away at a son’s wedding.
- ♥ Sarah is an 88-year-old woman is grieving for the loss of the witty conversations she and her 92-year-old husband used to have. Now his dementia gotten so bad that he has fallen into silence and needs her care 24/7.

- ♥ The friend of several members of your youth group is in Intensive Care on life support. She was at a party and thought it would be cool to try an inhalant.

These scenarios have happened or could happen in any church community. Wouldn't it be nice to have one person you could call on to help you with such problems? A Parish Nurse could help you with all of the above situations.

The ministry of parish nursing is a ministry of healing and wholeness. Parish nursing encompasses seven functions. The functions are health educator, health advocate, personal health counselor, referral agent, coordinator of volunteers, developer of support groups and an integrator of issues of faith and health. Parish nurses do not do treatments, draw blood, maintain intravenous products, or administer medication. The focus of the parish nurse practice is on the faith and health of the life of the congregation and as such, is intended to be integrated into the ministry of the church. The parish nurse is considered to be a member of the church staff.

Before beginning a parish nurse ministry in your church there is work to be done to educate the congregation about what it means. It is important that members understand that the church is a place of health—wholistic health! Much more than physical health, wholistic health also encompasses spiritual health and mental health. Church members must understand that the nurse is more than a provider of physical care and will not do treatments. Parish nurse ministry is a concrete way to live out the call to preach, teach, and heal.

There is special training for nurses who would like to be parish nurses. This course is the basic preparation for parish nursing and is available in more than sixty education institutions across the United States. The American Nurses Association recognizes parish nursing as a specialty practice. Parish nurses who attend one of the preparation classes receive a standardized core curriculum. They are taught the theological perspectives on health and healing and how to work within a congregation. They are taught to deal with situations that were described earlier.

Liability insurance is a prerequisite for the parish nurse and the congregation. Many denominations have coverage and it is not terribly expensive even when obtained from a private company.

If this is the first time you have thought about a health ministry in your church, you probably have not thought about who might be the best person for the job. You may have a nurse in your congregation who is interested in issues of faith and health and would be interested in helping you start such a ministry. There may be other health professionals in your congregation who might like to work on a task force to explore the idea of health ministry/parish nursing in your church.

There is more information available to you as you explore helping your church become a place of healing and wholeness. If you are reading this, you know that parish nurse consultants are available through the Presbyterian Health Network. Feel free to contact us with any questions you have. The **PHN Leadership Team** is happy to support, guide and consult with you at any time.

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