

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT HEALTH MINISTRY

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## *Why should a congregation consider health ministry?*

The current health care system in the U.S. doesn't focus on health, too often doesn't seem to care, and isn't a cohesive, holistic system. Instead, it's primarily disease oriented, fragmented and enormously expensive. The church, on the other hand, is in the business of healing, of saving.

The mission given Christ's disciples is to preach, teach and heal, and the church's teaching and preaching have far exceeded her healing in this day. The church needs to be true to her calling. She has the opportunity in this modern age to use many tools to bring about healing.

Health ministry and parish nursing in a congregation do not replicate services that already exist in the community, because health ministry addresses health more than illness. The health care system and the church offer plenty of space for health professionals and laity to work together to keep people well, to empower them, to educate them, to advocate for them, to teach them and to care for them.

**I will search for the lost, and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak.... I will shepherd the flock with justice. *Ezekiel 34:4,16***

## *What is the theological grounding for health ministry?*

Support for health ministry within the church has firm grounding. Episcopalians may not have many doctrines, but those concepts we hold dear do apply to health ministry:

**Creation.** God looked upon creation and said, "Behold, it is good. Behold, it is very good!" God has made all things that are, and all that are to be. And they are good - very good. God created matter -- flesh and blood and bones and teeth and spleen and all the rest. And they are very good!

**Incarnation.** God became flesh, and chose to live in the created world. God lived in matter, and does not stand apart from flesh. In Christ, God stands in the midst of the living today. Our hands and feet are the hands and feet of Christ in the world today; our kidneys and mouths and stomachs are no less Christ's.

**Stewardship.** Episcopalians understand that we are not owners, but caretakers, of the material world. Stewardship often applies to time, talent and treasure, but what about the torso? St. Paul reminds us that our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit. Are we not then to be good stewards of them? Are we not then to take good care of this flesh?

**Salvation.** The root of "salvation" is the Latin "salve," which means making whole. We cannot be made whole unless we consider all parts that make us who we are. All creation is to be restored, not just the non-material parts. As Paul explains in Ephesians, all things are held together in Christ. Our bodies are sacred.

**Suffering.** Jesus did not escape suffering, pain and death. He entered into it. He knew on some level that God would be at work there, too. Teilhard de Chardin reminds us that bleeding is the price we pay to let God enter us deeply. Jesus embraced the shadow-side of life to show us the fullness of God, a God who does not abandon us when the sunlight can't be seen, a God who walks with us through pain, through sickness, through dying. God is a God who suffers with us. Health ministry holds this up, as we are present with in their suffering.

## ***How does health ministry relate to spiritual healing?***

Support for health ministry within the church has firm grounding. Episcopalians may not have many doctrines, but those concepts we hold dear do apply to health ministry:

Healing is central to the ministry of Jesus. Jesus was a wholistic healer; he did not see a distinction between body and spirit when he forgave and restored sight. Twenty per cent of all the stories about Jesus refer to his healing; the Gospels contain some 35 references to Jesus healing. Too often we overlook them.

The miracle stories in light of twenty-first century technology can seem somewhat embarrassing. We find Jesus' simplicity embarrassing. We fail to see that our medical tools are an aid to healing, that they help create an environment where healing can take place, but that they are not healing in and of themselves. Healing happens in the invisible workings of the body's cells. God is at work there. All that health professionals do is help create a space for miraculous healing to happen.

Parish nursing and health ministries embrace spiritual healing, the Laying on of Hands and anointing with healing oil, just as they embrace other ways that God uses to heal. This ministry complements the work of other healing ministries in the church, including the long established work of the Order of St. Luke. All healing is of God.

**"Take heart, daughter," Jesus said,  
"your faith has healed you." And the  
woman was healed from that moment.**

*Matthew 9:20-22*

## ***How does health ministry differ from good pastoral care?***

Health ministry incorporates good pastoral care, but takes pastoral care somewhat further by introducing knowledge of the health care system and of the workings of the human body. The following example demonstrates how health ministry stretches pastoral care:

A parishioner spoke with her priest about her 97-year-old aunt who was in a nursing home and who was not eating. The doctor had asked the parishioner for permission to insert a gastric feeding tube. The parishioner knew that her aunt did not want dramatic measures, but nonetheless felt pressured to give permission for this procedure. The priest listened well, and after discussion shared that he did not see that it was incumbent upon the parishioner to have the tube placed. It was caring and loving not to make her undergo surgery.

The parishioner called the parish nurse the next day, saying she wanted all the information she could gather when making this decision. She wondered if it were more humane to let someone die in surgery (the aunt was on oxygen, and had cardiac problems as well as malnutrition) or to let someone starve to death. As the conversation unfolded, the nurse was able to suggest that other options were available. The nurse told the parishioner about her right to ask for a case conference, and agreed to accompany the parishioner to such a conference at the nursing home, attended by the dietician and the nursing staff as well.

The case conference revealed that the gastric tube was the easiest answer for the nursing home staff to deal with the aunt's lack of interest in food, but it was not necessarily the best answer for the patient. The aunt's dietary preferences were discussed, and the parishioner agreed to bring in some of her favorite food. The staff arranged for someone to be with the aunt during mealtime. The aunt started eating again!

Pastoral care here, offered by the parish nurse, included advocacy for the aunt and empowerment for the family.

## ***What is parish nursing?***

Parish nursing combines the knowledge and skills of nursing practice with an understanding of the spiritual and religious beliefs that underlie health. Parish nurses, with one foot in the spiritual world of the church and one foot in the physical world of medicine, minister in ways that reunite the mind, body and spirit, addressing and embracing the relationship between the visible and the invisible. The parish nurse links these spheres, translating the jargon, forging the connections and facilitating the parishioner's more complete understanding of his or her health experience.

## ***What are the roles of a parish nurse?***

The parish nurse engages in several roles. The International Parish Nurse Resource Center identifies the classic roles as follows:

Integrates faith and health within the parish community  
Counsels parishioners on questions of personal health  
Acts as a health educator  
Acts as a referral agent  
Coordinates volunteers  
Develops support groups  
Advocates for individual and community health

**Jesus touched her hand and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on him. *Matthew 8:14-15***

## ***What is the difference between parish nursing and health ministry?***

Actually, they fit very closely together. A parish nurse often leads a congregation in health ministry. Health ministry is broad in scope. It focuses more on outcomes for the parishioners and on the congregation's work of bringing health and healing in the community. Sometimes the phrase "health ministries" (plural) is used to emphasize the multiplicity of players; this ministry does not belong to any one person. Parish nursing focuses more on the nurse's roles and on the responsibilities that individual carries.

## ***Specifically, what does a Parish Nurse do?***

The parish nurse is a nurse of the church, not simply a nurse in a church. She is not transplanted from the hospital or clinic to perform the same tasks, and she does not attempt to replicate existing services available in the community and place them in the church building. Plenty of agencies are already providing nursing care in the home - dressing changes, blood draws, monitoring intravenous feedings, and so on. Most locations also have sufficient doctors and clinics available for treatments.

Under the Nurse Practice Act (which differs somewhat from state to state) the professional nurse has several responsibilities. Parts of the traditional nurse's responsibilities are delegated functions, tasks done under the supervision of a physician. Often these are invasive procedures requiring doctor's orders, and they are often the first tasks people think of when they imagine a nurse at work, but these are not the tasks of a parish nurse. The parish nurse focuses specifically on other parts of the Nurse Practice Act: assessing health needs, teaching, referring to services in the community, coordinating health care, counseling regarding health related concerns and advocating for those who need a voice. The parish nurse does not do "hands-on nursing" in the traditional health professional sense.

Carrying out a parish nurse's responsibilities takes many forms, and the specific programming depends on the individual parish with its particular demographics, resources and energy level. The parish nurse might offer Health Risk Appraisals, teach classes on safe babysitting, take blood pressures after the Sunday worship service and maintain a resource cart with information on health and illness. She might find a speaker on "The Healing Power of Humor," visit parishioners who are in the hospital, coordinate the Lay Eucharistic Ministers as they take the Sacrament to shut-ins, or even meet with parishioners to do exercise or Yoga. The possibilities are endless. What makes these services different from those offered in other settings is that they are conceived of and delivered in the context of Christian faith. They are not ends unto themselves. They are not body worshipping or narcissistic. They do not come from duty or obligation, but from a deep sense of our connectedness one to the other and to Christ.

## ***What is a typical day for a parish nurse?***

A parish nurse doesn't have a "typical" day. Sundays may include taking part in the service, assisting at a healing station, leading the prayers, possibly preaching, greeting people after the service and hearing their concerns, gathering information, teaching a Sunday School class or taking communion to those in the hospital as a Lay Eucharistic Minister.

A weekday can bring almost anything. For example, a parish nurse may do the following types of things during a standard week:

Attend a meeting with the AIDS Service Center to plan a program to help people cope with the up-coming holiday season  
Teach a session on menopause to a women's group  
Meet with a parishioner who is concerned about an aging parent  
Meet with a discharge planner at the hospital to help facilitate a parishioner's getting needed help at home  
Track down a program to help children of divorce  
Take a blood pressure for a concerned parishioner  
Lead a grief support group along with a social worker from the parish  
Organize and facilitate a plan to arrange a Sunday morning education series on various health concerns, perhaps using the skills of the physicians in the parish.

**"Parish nurse ministry creatively engages the long-standing tradition of the church to be directly involved in medical care. This association recognizes and holds together the power of faithful prayer and life with the practice of the medical arts and sciences as grace-filled means for healing and curing."**

**--The Right Rev. William Gregg,  
Bishop of Eastern Oregon**

## ***How do you know whether a church is ready for health ministries?***

There is no formula for determining the readiness of a congregation for a new ministry, though here are some things to consider:

Most churches already have some aspect of health ministry already in place, be it a corps of parishioners who deliver Meals on Wheels, an intercessory prayer group, a Crisis Committee, or a Stephen Ministry program. Many churches may not have named these programs "health ministry," though it is probably understood to be a part of health and caring. That gives something to build on. It tells where the current energy in the parish can be found. It gives a familiar place to start expanding ministry, should the church so choose.

Looking at the parish in terms of its resources and its energy is important in determining readiness. Resources don't have to be financial. They can be interest, skill, vision or commitment. If these exist, it might be the right time to harness them into a fuller, more organized program.

Recognizing the specific health-related needs in a congregation also informs health ministry. For example, does the parish have a large aging population? Or, is the parish full of young couples with little children, stressed by the demands of career and parenting? Are there obvious unmet needs? Necessity may be the driving force for beginning a health ministry program.

**"When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?" The King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."**

**Matthew 25:38-40**

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