

Supporting the Pastor: How A Parish Nurse Can Help

By Jane Givens, RN, FCN, MAT
Health Ministry Coordinator, First Presbyterian Church, Kalamazoo MI jgivens@givens.net

*"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens
and I will give you rest.*

*Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me;
for I am gentle and humble in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls.*

For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."
Matthew 11:28-30

Historically, the church has been known as the place of care. Christians started many hospitals in the 4th century to care for strangers, but particularly for poor strangers who had no other resources, and for the local poor. Gradually these hospitals were differentiated into separate institutions according to the type of person in need—orphans, widows, strangers, sick, and poor. Much later, hospitals became clearly separated from the church and became more secular institutions.

Searching for health care and finding the correct resources is not something taught in seminary and although church members should not expect you to know where to go or what to do for them during a health crisis, often they turn to their church. Having a health ministry team or a parish nurse can save the clergy person valuable time.

At no other time in the history of medical insurance has there been so many medically uninsured Americans walking around than there are in this year of 2008. That is 15.9% of Americans or 47 million people, of which 8.7 million are children. Because of lack of insurance, it is estimated that there are 18,000 unnecessary deaths per year.

Perhaps you have members in your congregation who are without health insurance. Your church may have even organized fundraisers for a member with traumatic illness who could not pay for treatment. The difficulty with fundraising is that soon the fundraisers will not be able to keep up with the needs of church members and there will be fewer church members who can afford to contribute to the funds for people in need.

Health care is an ever increasing burden for everyone. One of the many tasks a faith community nurse/parish nurse can help with is helping members of the church in prevention of illness. When someone does become ill, and has no medical insurance your parish nurse is trained to know the resources in your community and can help the members.

As an educator, the parish nurse advocates for consumer information by enabling people to know what health services are available, how they may be used, whom to contact and what the costs may be. She or he will also educate the church members about legislative changes in health care both in your state and nationally. A good health minister has the knowledge, gifts, and abilities in a cross section of disciplines that include pastoral care, community nursing, social work, wholistic health, wellness and personal growth.

As our society turns more and more to churches for help with unmet needs, the church needs to prepare itself to shoulder the burden of its members and community by addressing health care needs through health ministry. Our health care system is in trouble. The way to meet some of the needs of church members who have no health insurance is through prevention of illness and through help from a trained faith community nurse or health minister when something goes wrong.

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