



ADVOCACY AND CARE

The Evolving Call
of Parish Nurse
and Wellness
Coordinator

BY VIRGINIA BELL

In 1996, First Presbyterian Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan, started its Parish Nurse Program as a way to minister to the health concerns of the congregation's senior members and friends of the congregation. With the encouragement of then-pastor, Michael Lindvall, the wider mission committee of the session and a subcommittee of doctors and nurses in the congregation began discerning how parish nursing could and should work for their community.

Staff of the Parish Nurse Program at First Presbyterian helps identify and attends to the health needs of the congregation through education, counseling, and advocacy. Since the first nurse was hired in 1997, the parish nurse position has grown from caring exclusively for seniors to ministering to the health, wellness, safety and providing pastoral care for all. In response to the 1988 General Assembly call for congregations to promote health and wholeness, the program intentionally embraces the body, mind and spirit of each of God's children.

Flexibility and Focus

The parish nurse position has evolved with each new parish nurse—a reflection, in part, of the church's willingness to allow parish nurses to shape the position to fit their lives and assessment of member needs. Previous parish nurses have hosted office hours and blood pressure clinics; the current staff focuses on congregational pastoral care. Nurses adjust their weekly working hours based on the needs of the congregation and their own commitments.

Sandy Talbott, retired parish nurse, shares that in her experience "the nurse functioned in whatever areas a church may need." During her tenure, two areas of concern arose that she and the staff were able to tackle. Since First Presbyterian sits next to the University of Michigan campus, and since the university system offers good medical care, a more common problem was that some congregation members lack local family support. Making telephone calls to out-of-area family members helped ensure family were kept apprised of issues facing their loved

one receiving care. A second area of concern was church safety. Staff and appropriate committees instituted yearly intruder and fire drills at the close of a church service.

Currently, the parish nurse position is 15 hours per week. The immediate supervisor is the Associate Pastor for Pastoral Care and Congregational Life, Melissa Anne Rogers. Rev. Rogers writes: "This is a very esteemed position on our staff, and [is] a key ally to the staff, as well as members, in health and wellness." When hiring for the parish nurse position, Rogers and the search committee prioritize selecting nurses from within the congregation. This works at First Presbyterian as there are two large hospitals in the area, which employ or have employed many very skilled nurses. To date, all parish nurses hired by the church were registered nurses and members of First Presbyterian Church. Each nurse says she felt called to the position and responded in love to this call with generous gifts of time, energy and compassion.

Parish Nursing Nuts and Bolts

There are five aspects of the Parish Nursing/Wellness Coordination Program at First Presbyterian in Ann Arbor.

- ♦ **Health promotion**—through programs and education;
- ♦ **Care coordination**—as a health team member, discussing health issues, assessing needs, exploring potential avenues of assistance and identifying ways the church may be able to support the individual or family;
- ♦ **Collaboration**—working with other churches, agencies and resources to strengthen relationships in our community. As part of the pastoral care team, offer support and serve as a resource for our pastors and residents;
- ♦ **Health advocacy**—through listening and support, actively work to obtain care that is in the congregant's best interest and incorporate a holistic perspective;
- ♦ **Spiritual care**—this is what sets a parish nurse apart from much of the medical world. The parish nurse seeks to promote holistic health and care for body, mind and spirit.



Photos courtesy of Virginia Bell



Upper left: Parish Nurse Barb DeLancey checks First Presbyterian Office Manager Linda Robinson's blood pressure.

Lower left: Previous Parish Nurse Sandy Talbott comforts a member of First Presbyterian.

Right: Parish Nurses Stacey Pakela (left) and Barb DeLancey currently share the parish nurse roll at First Presbyterian Church in Ann Arbor.



The current position summary identifies four distinct ways the parish nurse actively promotes health.

- **Leads in identifying and meeting the congregation's health and health counseling needs.**

Examples: Being present at congregational events and recognizing people who may be showing signs of stress or decline; keeping an eye on those with possible needs through phone and home visits; being available to the congregation to share community and medical resources; identifying members who could benefit from short-term delivery of meals or transportation assistance; helping seniors with small tasks, share needs with staff for coordination; working with and supporting the Associate Pastor for Pastoral Care and Congregational Life.

- **Promotes the church's health and wellness ministry and maintains effective relationships with those who could be served by the role.**

Examples: Working with and supporting the Associate Pastor for Pastoral Care and Congregational Life in providing spiritual, emotional and social care; making phone calls and home or hospital visits; scheduling prayer time; ensuring the church building has a working defibrillator and up-to-date first aid kits; planning safety drills; helping navigate medical information or questions that members have related to their personal care; contacting out-of-town family members who may not be aware of health or safety issues of their loved ones; hosting caregiver seminars.

- **Interprets the health and wellness program to the congregation through a presence in worship and other gatherings.**

Examples: Being present at church gatherings; advocating a healthy lifestyle through adult education programs; communicating through church bulletins, brochures, annual report, newsletters, worship announcements, church website, senior resource information and other promotional media.

- **Collaborates with church groups.**

Examples: Working closely with church deacons and Stephen Ministries, the health and wellness

ministry advisory committee, as well as older adult ministry committees.

Appreciating Care

Two women currently share the parish nurse position. Both Barbara DeLancey and Stacey Pakela are accomplished, motivated, well-liked and excited to be a part of the Parish Nurse Program. Stacey says that she was very grateful for the opportunity to continue what she believes is God's calling for her at this time. She referenced a quote from Mikala Albertson's blog, *Ordinary on Purpose*, as the words touched her heart and speaks to how she wants to live her life as she embarks on this new role as a parish nurse:

"Let us do the best job we can while we are here. To serve. And be kind. To seek joy in the ordinary. And love with everything we have."^{*}

Church members appreciate the support of a parish nurse. Reflections about the parish nurse have been whole-heartedly positive. Joyce Himbaugh says, "Having a parish nurse is a very special program for our church family because it is the intersection of our faith and humanness on this earth. A nurse can pray and speak of

faith as a part of the whole person, spiritually and physically.”

Joyce also shares two of her favorite quotes, which are widely attributed to two “parish nurses”—Christians who provided abundant, holistic care for those around them.

“Let us touch the dying, the poor, the lonely and the unwanted according to the graces we have received and let us not be ashamed or slow to do the humble work.”

—Mother Teresa

“Trying to do the Lord’s work in your own strength is the most confusing, exhausting and tedious of all work. But when you are filled with the Holy Spirit, then the ministry of Jesus just flows out of you.”

—Corrie Ten Boom

In addition, church member Lynne Gulick writes, “My recent medical emergency ‘brought home’ how blessed I am to be a part of the faith community of First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor. One of the great blessings was the attention of Barb, one of our new parish nurses. She called me twice within the first four days. She understood my condition and treatment program, which was invaluable. I knew that information would be important to the entire faith community who would be called on to help me if needed. I think it is unique to have a parish nurse. Every church should have one.”

Another church member remembers how happy her sister with developmental challenges was after each parish nurse home visit. Another individual says that the caregiver meetings that were hosted by the

parish nurse were invaluable in her journey as a caregiver.

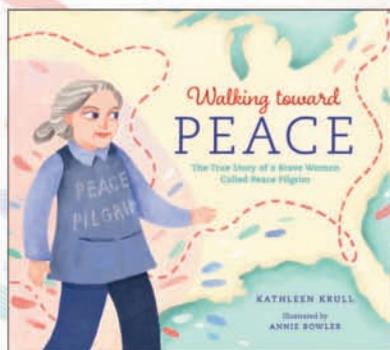
Though the needs of congregations vary, parish nurses are uniquely situated to assist members with their physical, mental, spiritual and medical care needs. And so, from the author’s viewpoint, isn’t it a good thing to have an earthly angel keeping an eye on you? 🍀

Virginia E. Bell serves as moderator for Presbyterian Women at First Presbyterian in Ann Arbor. For this article, she consulted with First Presbyterian records and collaborated with Rev. Melissa Anne Rogers, Sandy Talbutt, Barb DeLancy, Stacey Pakela, Linda Robinson, and the PW Coordinating Team at First Presbyterian Church, Ann Arbor.

Notes

* Mikala Albertson, “I Don’t Need To Be Perfect To Sing,” January 11, 2021; www.ordinaryon-purpose.com/blog/i-dont-need-to-be-perfect-to-sing.

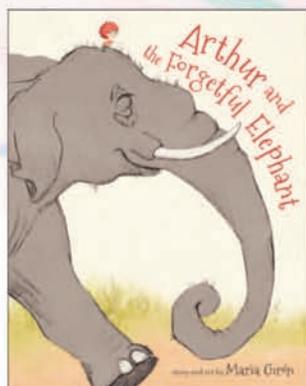
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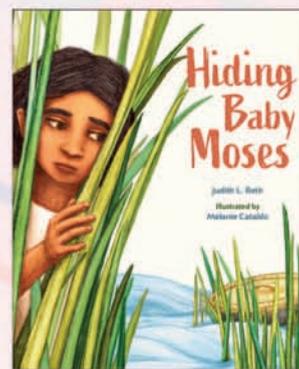
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