

HEALING GOD'S PEOPLE IN THE PARISH COMMUNITY: PARISH NURSING

By Marion Avtges, R.N.

EDITOR'S NOTE

This article describes the Parish Nursing Ministry developed by Nurse Avtges. She delivered an outstanding presentation of this ministry at the 14th Annual OCAMPR National Conference [5-6 November, 2004] at Hellenic College/Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology Brookline, Massachusetts: "Christ in the Healing Community". It is essential as Orthodox Christians that we turn not only our hearts to Christ but that our love for Him is so great it overflows out to others. This ministry exemplifies so well the goals and aims of OCAMPR serving the community, healing body, mind and spirit, in Christ's name by the overflow of love.

- Fr. George Morelli, Editor

*"Jesus went around to all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom and curing every disease and illness."
(MT 9:35)*

Historic Background:

Health ministries and the practice of Parish Nursing have been in existence since early Christian times. Nursing and caring for the sick and infirm was given a place of honor and respect. Christ in his own ministry of teaching, healing, and preaching set the example for his apostles and others to follow. He charged us with the mission to serve and care for our sisters and brothers; to tend to the whole person and to the spiritual needs of each person entrusted to our care. Christ's ministry was focused on healing. He performed more miracles of healing than of any other. Among the first followers who took up their cross and were given the task of caring for the sick and infirm were those of the diaconate. Deacons and deaconesses are the earliest documented professional nurses. They brought care and faith into the homes of the ill; they established hospitals, and hospices. Thus, from these beginnings we learn that Parish Nurses tend to the physical, psychological, and spiritual needs of the person in their care.

Parish Nursing is a recent, but growing segment of nursing in America today. The current concept of Parish Nursing originated in the mid 1980's by Granger Westberg, a Lutheran pastor from Park Ridge, Illinois. He envisioned a need to bring the expertise of a nurse into the congregation to help reclaim the church's role as a place of healing and wellness. He taught in the nursing school of a large Chicago medical center where he developed coursework on the relationship between religion and health. His premise was that "medicine transcends the physical because true healing involves the body, the mind and the spirit."

Purpose of the Parish Nurse Program

Today the mission of the Parish Nurse is to partner with the pastoral staff of the congregation and to integrate faith and health. The Parish Nurse works closely with the pastoral staff to identify, support, and guide those in the congregation who need assistance. The Parish Nurse is a health educator, personal health counselor, referral agent, trainer of volunteers, initiator of support groups, and health advocate. Parish Nurses do not provide hands on nursing care, but rather help direct those in need to the best and most appropriate health care providers.

Parish Nursing in the Greek Orthodox Community of Watertown , MA

Since the summer of 1999 the Taxiarchae/Archangels Community has had the volunteer services of a Parish Nurse. With the blessings of Metropolitan Methodios and Father Theodore J. Barbas, Presbyter, Marion Avtges developed the Parish Nurse Ministry at the Taxiarchae/Archangels Church in Watertown, MA. Marion is a registered nurse with a BA in Psychology and Education and is certified in Parish Nursing from Boston College.

The ministry has developed to include a weekly Blood Pressure Clinic, a monthly Cholesterol and Glucose Screening, educational health programs, a volunteer ministry called Compassionate Friends who visit the homebound, and a monthly Bereavement Support Group led by the Parish Nurse and Father Barbas. Regular visits are made to parishioners in local nursing homes. All services are offered in a confidential manner. The Parish Nurse partners with other church ministries: Philoptohos (Friends of the Poor, Ladies Philanthropic Association), Greek Orthodox Youth Association, (GOYA), Mommy and Me Playgroup, American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association (AHEPA, <http://www.ahepa.org/>), and Parish Council to present health programs that are of interest to the group. Some services are offered to the Watertown community as a "Good Neighbor" policy.

Funding

Funds for the support of the Parish Nurse Ministry have come from several sources. The Parish Council gives support. Additionally, financial support for equipment has come from grants from a local bank and the town of Watertown.

Future Growth

Our long-range plans include:

- The training of other nurses in our parish. We are fortunate to have at least seven nurses in our parish. Three already are working with the Parish Nurse but there is a need to further their training and certification.
- Joining with other faiths in the Watertown community to establish Parish Nurse ministries to work under one umbrella with the local hospital. This would legitimize the practice of Parish Nursing.
- Obtaining additional grant funding for equipment and to offer a wider range of programs.
- Providing a salary or stipend for the Parish Nurse.

Contacts, Resources and Training

The International Parish Nurse Resource Center offers documentation and assessment tools for parish nurses. They also have a newsletter entitled *Perspectives*. They can be reached at Advocate Health and Hospitals Corporation, 205 West Touchy Avenue, Suite 124, Park Ridge, IL 60068. Tel.800-556-5368.

International Parish Nurse Resource Center , Deaconess Parish Nurse Ministries

475 East Lockwood Avenue , St. Louis, MO 63119 , 314-918-2559,
<http://www.ipnrc.parishnurses.org/>

Health Ministry Association , 295 w. Crossville Road, St. 130, Roswell, GA 30075, 800-280-9919 <http://www.hmassoc.org/>

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