

Spiritual component key part of parish nursing

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BELTON—While a parish nurse could be a boon to the health of congregations across the state, the likelihood of a Texas Baptist church having one is hampered by the fact that most congregations—and most nursing students—have little awareness the ministry exists, a University of Mary Hardin-Baylor nursing professor said.

Parish nursing has a greater visibility in the Deep South and the Midwest, but only small pockets of parish nursing exist in Texas, and those generally are in churches of other denominations, said Linda Pehl, distinguished professor of nursing at UMHB. Some parish nurses in rural areas may serve the needs of seven or eight congregations.

Linda Pehl,
distinguished professor
of nursing at the
University of Mary
Hardin-Baylor, believes
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(PHOTO/George
Henson)

Some Baptist churches, such as Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, have parish nurses, but those are few in number.

Parish nursing fits in well, however, with the teaching at most Baptist nursing schools that health is a combination of “bio-, psycho-, social and

spiritual health,” Pehl said.

“In parish nursing, the spiritual component is very strong and overrides everything else,” she said. “It really is the ideal that the parish nurse would be a part of the health ministry of the church—that is a specific ministry just like you have adult ministry and children’s ministry, this would be a health ministry, and the parish nurse would be in charge of that.”

Parish nursing is tailored to meet the needs of each congregation. While the nurses’ work includes some universal things like education concerning good eating habits and exercise routines, other duties would be dictated by the congregation’s makeup.

Some congregations may include people who need training in dealing with chronic conditions like diabetes, and others may need a parish nurse to invite a county public health officer to the church to administer inoculations to school children.

In general, parish nurses seek to integrate faith and health, serve as personal health counselors, act as health educators and advocates, serve as referral agents, coordinate volunteers, assess the needs of the congregation, develop programs to meet those needs and organize support groups.

Parish nurses generally are facilitators rather than direct caregivers, Pehl said. For instance, instead of administering inoculations, a parish nurse either would bring someone else in to give the shots or set up transportation to a clinic.

But if parish nursing is such a good thing, why don’t more Baptist churches have them? While some nurses already are involved in hospital nursing or public health nursing and don’t have time for another role, an even greater problem is ignorance, Pehl stressed.

Most churches have not decided against parish nursing, she said. “They are not even aware it exists.”

And the flip side is that if most nursing students were asked about parish nursing, “I don’t think they would recognize that at all,” she acknowledged.

Pehl hopes to combat that in the next few years by teaching a parish nursing seminar at UMHB. Baylor University’s Louise Herrington School of Nursing also teaches a parish nursing seminar periodically.

Pehl wants to teach the course because she feels the need for parish nursing will increase in coming years.

“I think the need will increase because of the situation we’re in with our health care in general. It’s in a crisis right now, and people are looking for alternatives to improve our situation—to decrease costs. Obviously, if you can increase the health state of the nation, it’s going to decrease the cost of health care.”