

Fellowship empowers and encourages health care professionals

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CLINTON, Miss.—Even in the best of times, nursing is a demanding profession. And those demands have skyrocketed over the past year, as nurses and other health care workers served on the front lines in the war on COVID-19.



Deborah Bolian, who has taught nursing at Mississippi College for 35 years, currently is president-elect of Baptist Nursing Fellowship. She affirmed BNF's focus on missions, fellowship and "the bonding that you have among Christian nurses being together."
(WMU photo by Pam Henderson)

Some Christian health care professionals find relief, renewal and

encouragement in the [Baptist Nursing Fellowship](#).

Established in 1983, Baptist Nursing Fellowship provides missions opportunities, continuing education and fellowship for Christian nurses and allied health professionals in the United States and on mission fields around the world.

A longtime ministry partner with national Woman's Missionary Union, the fellowship's official mission is to "empower, educate and encourage nurses to fulfill Christ's mission through healing skills."

As National Nurses Week is observed May 6-12, the Baptist Nursing Fellowship is focused on its two-year theme of "Touch Twice in Jesus' Name." Highlighting both the physical and spiritual impact that Christian nurses can make, that theme has become especially meaningful amid the global pandemic.

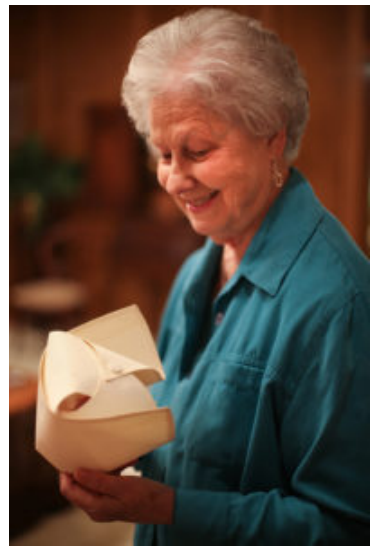
The virus took a deeply personal toll on Baptist Nursing Fellowship members with the loss of Executive Director Lori Spikes to COVID-19 last fall. Spikes, a longtime Southern Baptist missionary to Chile, was a registered nurse with more than 40 years of experience in health care. She was elected as the fellowship's executive director in 2018, just two years before her death.

"We prayed through the whole thing that God would spare Lori," said Debby Akerman, president of the fellowship. "He chose to heal her in heaven."

"We miss her greatly. But we know that she's not saying, 'Gee, I wish I were back there doing BNF.' She's with the Lord. She served him all her life."

Serving Christ by serving others

That lifelong commitment to serving Christ by serving others is evident in the lives of nurses who have been involved in the Baptist Nursing Fellowship over the years. From founding president Ellen Tabor and charter member Melba Wilkerson to current president Akerman and president-elect Deborah Bolian, leaders and participants have maintained a clear focus on making a missions impact for the gospel.



Melba Wilkerson of Henderson, Texas, displays her nurse's cap she received after earning her Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree from Texas Woman's University. She is a charter member of Baptist Nursing Fellowship which was organized in

1983. (WMU photo by
Pam Henderson)

Tabor, who died in 2019 at age 90, was actively involved in the fellowship throughout its history. In an interview during the Baptist Nursing Fellowship 35th anniversary in 2018, she said her initial dream for the fellowship, “which we have kept the whole time, was that we would invite nurses who have a calling from God to use their nursing skills to advance his work, whether in America or on the mission field.”

For Melba Wilkerson, the opportunities to participate in mission trips and serve alongside fellow Christian nurses are key benefits of her involvement in the Baptist Nursing Fellowship over the years.

“When you go on a mission trip, you can’t ever be the same again because you see different cultures and meet different people,” she noted. “I’ve got friends from everywhere and I consider that a blessing that BNF has given me.”

Wilkerson recently was honored as one of the inaugural Nightingale members of the fellowship, a designation honoring members who are age 80 or older and have been involved in the organization at least 15 years.

“I think God has something great in our future,” Wilkerson said. “I just pray that as we do move forward, that we’ll allow God to direct us and show us what we need to do to continue to have this mission. I think that nurses do need to understand that it’s a calling.”

Missions at the heart of BNF

For Akerman, missions is at the heart of the organization. As she and other fellowship leaders met and strategized together, she said they agreed that “BNF would become *the* missions organization for nurses and allied

medical caregivers.” Her goal, she added, is that “when people think BNF, they think missions.”



Thailand was the site of a Baptist Nursing Fellowship missions trip in 2019 prior to travel restrictions imposed by the COVID pandemic. Looking toward future missions opportunities, BNF President Debby Akerman said she is encouraging members to “identify the places you will go so that when this is done, you’re ready.” (Photo courtesy of Debby Akerman)

Akerman noted fellowship membership ranges from current and retired nurses and medical missionaries to allied medical professionals, student members and honorary members.

Looking to the future, she said one of her goals is to contact every Baptist college and university and say, “If you want student nurses to be involved in missions, we’ve got an answer for you.”

In addition to recruiting Christian nurses, she said physical therapists, pharmacists, emergency medical technicians and other health care workers are welcome to join the fellowship and share their expertise with the group.

“In all the medical teams I’ve ever been on, there’s always been someone who said, ‘I just don’t know what I’ll be able to do,’” she said. “And there’s something that comes along that only they can do.

“We’re going to be truly a missional nursing organization. We need to make sure that our membership is disciplined in missions as well. It will not be just: ‘Here’s a missions opportunity. Let’s go do it.’ It will be, ‘Let’s understand this and come alongside our missionaries so that we meet their needs and the needs of the people.’”

Seeking to maintain the fellowship’s ministry focus even amid social distancing, recent events have included an online continuing education event about telemedicine and the group’s first online virtual prayer meeting.

While the pandemic has affected travel and missions opportunities, Akerman said, she is encouraging members to “identify the places you will go so that when this is done, you’re ready.”

“You have put the teams together in your heart and in your mind, and they’re ready to go,” she said.

Empower nurses for missions

President-Elect Deborah Bolian, assistant professor of nursing at Mississippi College, will succeed Akerman as president during the group’s 2021 Baptist Nursing Fellowship Summit, Nov. 4-7 in Birmingham, Ala.

“My vision for BNF is to continue to empower nurses to be missionaries for Christ,” she affirmed. “I believe that God gave us that as a directive, and he

has given us the tools” to accomplish that goal.

Bolian said she hopes everyone involved in the fellowship “can have that joy of being able to go on a mission trip and serve Christ. I think that once you do that, you cannot dampen the fire that lights.”