



# Ethically Speaking...

Newsletter of the Canadian Catholic Bioethics Institute  
at Assumption University

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## Ethically Speaking...

provides news and information from the Canadian Catholic Bioethics Institute at Assumption University.



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## PARISH NURSING: A WORK OF THE HEART

**P**arish nursing is an emerging area of specialized professional nursing practice that focuses on health maintenance and health promotion for parishioners and the community. Although considered to be one of the newer nursing specialties, its origins are historic and deeply entrenched in the nursing profession itself. Rooted in the healing mission of the Church, parish nursing emphasizes the wholeness of body mind and spirit. It is founded on the belief that all faith communities are places of health and healing and have a role in promoting wholeness through the integration of faith and health. In keeping with Judeo-Christian tradition, parish nursing is consistent with the basic assumptions of many faiths that we care for self and others as an expression of God's love. (National Caregivers Library, 2017, para. 4). Its main purpose is to help the faith community enable members of the congregation to live full, abundant lives.

The movement began in Chicago in the 1980's. Granger Westberg (1913-1999), a Lutheran minister considered to be the founder of modern parish nursing, used the term "parish nurse" to describe the unique, specialized practice of professional nursing in faith communities to promote holistic health.



Parish nursing came to Canada in 1998, with a pilot project by InterChurch Health Ministries (ICHM) in Oshawa. In 1998 the Canadian Association for Parish Nursing Ministry (CAPNM), was founded to develop parish nursing in Canada, education, and practice standards.

According to the Canadian Association for Parish Nursing Ministry, the function of the parish nurse *“is to promote the integration of faith and health in a variety of ways that reflect the context of the faith community”*. The Parish nurse has knowledge and skills in two areas, professional nursing and spiritual care. The Canadian Association for Parish Nursing Ministry (CAPNM) has established practice standards and core competencies.

A parish nurse is defined as “a registered nurse with specialized knowledge, who is called to ministry and affirmed by a faith community to promote health, healing and wholeness”. They must be registered in the province in which they practice, and their license or certificate of competence must be valid and current. This ensures that the public is receiving safe and competent care.

Although nursing itself is a vocation or “call”, parish nursing ministry is a call to a specialized practice. The nurse is called by God to this special service. It is a step in one’s faith journey that brings the nurse to parish nursing ministry. The nurse must have specialized knowledge which meets the criteria of the core learning competencies developed by the Canadian Association for Parish Nursing Ministry. Although registered, educated and aware of God’s call, they must also be called by the faith community. By being called to serve the faith community, the nurse becomes

affirmed as the parish nurse thus validating the call to ministry. As a member of the faith community the parish nurse links faith and health to combine professional nursing practice within the Christian ministry.

One service which parish nurses do not provide, is direct medical care. It is not a “hands-on” specialty but rather, focuses on health promotion, healing, and wellbeing. The role encompasses the following dimensions of care:

- ◆ **Integrator of Faith and Health**, serving as a “translator” between faith and healthcare communities. With a knowledge base in both areas, many times the parish nurse can clarify issues and or reinforce the strong tie between faith and health.
- ◆ **Health Educator**, providing educational programs to the congregation such as health screenings and illness prevention.
- ◆ **Health Counselor**, providing individual health counseling services in the home or long-term care facility.
- ◆ **“Navigator” or “Advocate,”** assisting members in finding their way through healthcare systems.
- ◆ **Referral Agent**, finding resources and making referrals to organizations and support services to improve the member’s quality of life.
- ◆ **Developer of Support Groups**, initiating and organizing groups designed to assist the participants with a specific issue.

Across Canada there are several programs with relevant curriculum to provide this specialized knowledge. In Ontario, parish nursing preparation courses are offered for registered nurses through InterChurch Health Ministries Canada (ICHM) at Emmanuel

College, University of Toronto and Waterloo Lutheran Seminary as part of their continuing education program. This course is taught at the Baccalaureate level with a theory and practice component. The course "Foundations in Parish Nursing", is offered as a weeklong summer institute by the Institute for Catholic Formation, St. Peter's Seminary, in London, Ontario. It introduces the fundamental concepts of the practice of parish nursing, which has its basis in the Christian faith, and seeks health promotion with a preventative focus. It meets the criteria of CAPNM Standard and Core Competencies. These institutions issue a certificate on completion of the course.

Further information about parish nursing ministry in Canada, including education programs, core learning competencies, standards of practice and other work of the Canadian Association for Parish Nursing Ministry, can be found at: [www.capnm.ca](http://www.capnm.ca)

Parish nursing is unique in that it incorporates the spiritual aspect of the patient into nursing care. It is a truly wholistic approach to care addressing the body, mind, and spirit. The parish nurse has many roles in assisting the community's members, including care provider, educator, and advocate. The nurse functions as an important member of the staff providing insight to clergy that may otherwise be overlooked. Parish nursing services are designed to involve individuals, families and congregations as active partners in their personal health. Through this involvement, nurses help empower communities and foster an environment of understanding and support. The work of the parish nurse is beyond that of medical care—It is a work of the heart.

## Reflections of a Parish Nurse

*We invited Shirley Markham, Parish Nurse at Our Lady of Mount Carmel to share her faith journey to becoming a parish nurse. This is her story:*

The journey that has taken me along the path to parish nursing began 60 years ago, when I graduated from Hotel Dieu School of Nursing. I was blessed to learn the importance of praying for my vocation as a young person, attending Catholic elementary and high school. Our teachers and priests spoke often about discovering intimacy with God where he reveals himself to us through the Holy Spirit.

Growing up in the 50's, I was surrounded by their influence and the importance of prayer, so that I would choose wisely. Today more than ever, the world needs leaders who believe and practice the Word of the Lord. In the diversity of vocations, there must be living witnesses to love without limit. The respect and admiration that I experienced with the medical profession really inspired me. Living in residence for three years allowed us to trust in a structured environment. Our instructors were examples, living their faith through action as they molded us through their integrity, showing us the way. They held the bar high and we were expected to live up to their standards.

As a young nurse with no experience, I found the workload very challenging. Family and friends suggested I leave. Once again, the influence of senior staff who were "hands on" professionals who "walked the talk", kept me going. I learned so much about the suffering

and strength of patients and *their* struggle taught me to give back with love and compassion. When Riverview Hospital closed, I ventured into Occupational Health and became coordinator of Occupational Health at Windsor Regional Hospital. I retired from a rewarding nursing career in 2001 blessed to have served for 43 years.

I went into retirement with mixed feelings, knowing I had more to give. I came upon an article about parish nursing in the Diocesan Newsletter. That same year, enrolled in a Bible study course, I was impressed by the walk of St. Paul, and looking for a place where I could make a difference. I spoke with Fr. Mike Parent, Pastor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel about a Parish Nursing Program. He was very interested in the idea and supported me as I enrolled in the a Certificate in Pastoral Care through McMaster Divinity College, which I completed in 2016. Once again, I was guided by the Holy Spirit as I worked through the Canadian Association of Parish Nurses standards of practice and became parish nurse at Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

My particular focus in my role of parish nurse is one of leadership. As part of the Pastoral Care Team I am called to serve parishioners with their health needs, utilizing the knowledge I have gained through my education in Pastoral Care. My role is to promote the integration of faith and health through advocacy, resource referral, counselling and education.

There is so much to do and with the support of the Pastor, I am able to reach out to many groups within our community—the Catholic Women’s League, Community Committees such as Ethics and Infection Control; Refugee

Ministry, Social Justice Group. Most recently, we are committing our energies to becoming a center for the New Evangelization.

God called upon Samuel to complete a task and gave him skills and gifts to accomplish the work. Samuel’s calling has given me insight into my own experiences and the importance of listening to God when he calls. I am called to spread the Word to everyone to pray and love and be the best God has created me to be through my ministry as Parish Nurse.



## References, Resources & Links

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## Links

The Institute for Catholic Formation: [www.stpetersseminary.ca](http://www.stpetersseminary.ca)

Parish Nursing Interest Group: [www.pnig.rnao.ca](http://www.pnig.rnao.ca)

Canadian Association for Parish Nursing Ministry (CAPNM): [www.capnm.ca](http://www.capnm.ca)

International Parish Nurse Resource Centre: [www.parishnurses.org](http://www.parishnurses.org)

InterChurch Health Ministries: [www.ichm.ca](http://www.ichm.ca)

**Ethically Speaking** provides news, articles and information from the Canadian Catholic Bioethics Institute at Assumption University in Windsor, Ontario. We welcome comments and feedback. Should you have suggestions for future articles or inserts, please contact the Editor at [CCBI-A@assumptionu.ca](mailto:CCBI-A@assumptionu.ca)

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