

Parish Nurses

WHO WE ARE, WHAT WE DO AND HOW WE DO IT



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Introduction

Within the last decade, parish nursing has gained recognition as a specialized, professional nursing practice. Thus far, few national research studies have focused on parish nurses and what they do in churches and faith communities. A mailing to more than 5,000 parish nurses in the United States was sent in January 2012. The 15-minute survey consisted of three parts: Demographics of parish nurses, ministry and program development and support from clergy, church, family and community. Data was collected over the course of a six-month period from parish nurses in at least 25 states.

470 parish nurses across the United States participated in the survey, answering questions about themselves and the ministries that have been developed. All participants were female, ranging in age from 35 to 86 years old. Ethnicity closely resembled our national nurse population with 98% Caucasian, 1% African American and 1% Hispanic. The majority of participants held an associate degree or diploma in Nursing. 84 percent of nurses served their own faith denomination and church of membership.

39 percent of parish nurses were in the specialty for less than one year. More than half of the nurses reported that they were congregational non-paid volunteers with operating budgets of less than \$2,000, by which they developed and maintained their programs and ministries. Participants relied heavily on other registered nurse (RN) and lay volunteers within a committee structure toward their goal of congregational health.

Parish nurses serve their congregations in many different and various roles. However, more than 80 percent of parish nurses had a blood pressure ministry. Nearly 50 percent had a visitation program to shut-ins and hospitalized patients. Other programs included support groups, children's programs, health fairs, referrals, one-to-one counseling and others.

Parish Nurse Profile

- ▶ Female
- ▶ 35 to 86 years old
- ▶ 98% Caucasian, 1% African American, 1% Hispanic
- ▶ 84% serve their own church of membership



Who We Are

In this survey, I wanted to identify the demographics of parish nurses, including gender, age, education level and preparation, religious denomination, length of service in the congregation and hours spent in a congregational health ministry. With a total of 470 surveys received, 85 percent called themselves 'parish nurses,' 12 percent titled themselves 'faith community nurses' and three percent had the title 'health ministers.' Out of 470 respondents, 88 were no longer serving as parish nurses for reasons of retirement, age, lack of funding, lack of clergy support or health problems.

As parish nurses, 65 percent considered themselves retired from their other nursing positions and were 60 years or older, 22 percent were between 50-59 years of age and three percent were between 35-49 years old. The parish nurses' mean age was 65 years old. Furthermore, level of nursing education correlated with age. Older parish nurses were educated in diploma schools of nursing held in hospitals.

Highest Nursing Degree of Education	Number	Percentage
Licensed Practical Degree	2	1%
Associate Degree	47	14%
Diploma	88	26%
Bachelor's Degree	119	35%
Master's Degree	71	21%
Doctorate Degree	10	3%

Most participants lived in the Midwest (76 percent), West (13 percent), and East (10 percent). The top five states responding were Wisconsin (20 percent), Illinois (14 percent), Minnesota (eight percent), California (seven percent) and Michigan (six percent).

Another goal of this study was to understand how long and where these parish nurses have been serving. The range of service was between six months and 26 years. 20 percent of participants served for five years or less, 30 percent served 6–10 years, 29 percent served 11–15 years, 11 percent served 16–20 years and one percent served between 21–26 years. I also asked participants if they served as a parish nurse coordinator at a church. 47 percent replied yes and 53 percent replied no. 32 percent of participants responded that they were being paid for their position as a parish nurse and 68 percent were strictly volunteers. Lastly, religious denomination was an overwhelming 80 percent Lutheran followed by eight percent Catholic and two percent Methodist.

What We Do

The activities that I surveyed were broken down by the age populations that were being served. Populations included infant to grade school, high school to college and middle-aged to senior. Questions also addressed services to special groups, including veterans, widows and widowers, and those who are developmentally disabled. The top parish nurse activities involving the infant to middle school age groups were health screenings, health education, vacation Bible school, hand-washing education and resources for parents. Activities for the high school to college age group were health education, health counseling and first aid/CPR. Parish nurses focused on blood pressure screenings, health education, visitation, exercise ministries, monthly newsletters and flu shot clinics for the middle-aged to senior population.

The top ministries that were initiated by parish nurses spanned all ages.

Name of Program	Number	Percentage
Blood Pressure	67	34.2%
Personal Health Counseling and Consultation	57	29.1%
Home Visits	56	28.5%
Education	43	22.3%
Facility Visits	24	12.2%
Resource Referral	16	8.2%

Other services offered by nurses were blood pressure screenings (63 percent), writing health articles (57 percent), prayer shawl ministries (29 percent) and bathroom ministries (seven percent). Some parish nurses reported teaching classes such as CPR, Bible studies, first aid, exercise and flexibility. Nursing home and hospital visits were a part of 50 percent of parish nurse ministries. The frequency for nursing home visits was usually 1-2 hours per week.

Counseling and spiritual ministry underscores a parish nurse's work in the church. Of the 470 respondents, 234 (50 percent) said they incorporated prayer, 158 (34 percent) grief counseling, 113 (24 percent) devotions, 75 (16 percent) Bible studies and 26 (six percent) spiritual music. Participants said that counseling was offered to many different populations including congregation members, seniors, clergy and shut-ins.

How We Do It

Along with financial assistance, being supported by clergy, congregation and family is key for the success of parish nurses. Health and wellness committees are a significant part of 47 percent of parish nurses' work. 68 percent of these committees had 1–6 members and 32 percent had 7–12 members, including registered nurses, clergy, church elders, teachers and lay ministers. Concerning clergy support, 305 of the 470 participants' surveys affirmed that they felt clergy support. The average amount of time per month dedicated by the clergy was 1–5 hours in parish nurse meetings and at events and programs held by the parish nurses.

173 of 470 participants responded that they receive a budget for their ministry. However, 100 reported that they do not receive any monies to support health and wellness programs. The majority who did receive a budget reported a budget of less than \$1,000. Another avenue for financial support is grants. However, only about 20 percent of the responding participants report having written a grant.

As for family, parish nurses feel that they are supported by family. "They are supportive of time away from home to care for others," reported one parish nurse concerning her family's support. 312 respondents indicated that their family supported their ministry, while only three said that they did not. Many responded that they lived alone or were widowed, so this was not a problem. Support from the congregation was similar with 294 saying that they received support and 13 reporting that they did not.

Conclusions

This national survey captured responses from parish nurses across the United States. Demographics were similar to smaller studies. In essence, parish nurses are female, white and retired from their paid positions in acute care, clinic or extended care. However, their mission is the desire to serve their church and community as a volunteer in their own congregation and denomination for 1–10 hours per week with a commitment of 5–10 years of service.

Parish nurses work as a team with clergy and other nurses and lay people who are interested in congregational health.

Parish nurses have developed service-oriented ministries with budgets of less than \$1,000. They are stewards of several resources, creating unique ministries for their churches and communities. Parish nurses underscore spiritual care-giving, the essence of this nursing specialty. They witness for Christ by prayer, prayer shawls, grief counseling, devotions, music and their presence in visiting shut-ins and those who are hospitalized.

Recommendations

As an educator, and in reflection of the past, present and future of parish nursing and congregational health, I offer the following recommendations:

- › Continue introductory educational programs for new parish nurses and continuing education for nurses who serve in this ministry in a cost-effective way.
- › Include theology in all educational aspects of parish nursing, underscoring the spiritual ministry of parish nurses.
- › Expand grant-writing opportunities and other creative ways to financially support parish nurse ministries.
- › Develop resources for parish nurses to use in developing their ministries.

- › Continue to conduct research about parish nursing and congregational health. More importantly, research the impact of parish nurse ministries on congregational outcomes in health and wellness.
- › Encourage networking and mentoring with other parish nurses in the community.

In conclusion, this national survey demonstrated the growth of parish nurse ministries. Churches are becoming aware of this ministry, and health care institutions are using parish nurses as part of their referral system. This ministry will continue to serve the Church as parish nurses share the Gospel message through their service to others.

