

Book Review by Dr Richard Henderson-Smith

**‘Rediscovering a Ministry of Health;
Parish Nursing as a mission of the local church’**

by Helen Anne Wordsworth

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If a plan were hatched to roll out spiritual care across the UK this would be its handbook. Helen Wordsworth calculates that if 10% of the country's workforce of 600,000 Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) registered nurses had any link with local churches, the possibility of a trained parish nurse attached to each of the 46,000 orthodox mainstream churches could be realised. She does not claim that this is likely but the aspiration is a worthy one, given the evidence of this book, which began life as her PhD thesis. She argues her case (though in the attempt to be comprehensive, rather repetitively) on the basis of carefully structured questionnaires and interviews conducted with ministers and parish nurses in 15 churches of several denominations, which had been running such a programme for over eighteen months. A group of 77 randomly picked churches without such an operation were willing to complete questionnaires and be used as a control.

The author describes the development of parish nursing and the philosophy of the Christian churches currently employing them. Evidence for this role stems from as early as the tenth century and takes as foundational some of the ideas of Florence Nightingale, who had seen it in operation in Germany. The parish nurse movement is worldwide, with international symposia and established training schemes. Its core principle is that alongside physical, psychological and social care, pastorally orientated spiritual care is essential, rooted within a faith community. This becomes a source of health and healing, empowering individuals to become 'active partners in the management of their personal resources', thus fostering a sense of well-being even in the presence of illness. She notes that Greek dualism of body and soul was not originally part of Christian thought, since it was unknown in Hebrew culture, which conceived of health as a quality of the whole human being.

Wordsworth's evaluation found that over a third of the work of British parish nurses is psychological and spiritual, the rest physical and functional. Her statistics show support for those with mental health issues in almost all of the 92 churches surveyed. Previous studies have demonstrated positive self-development and self-reflection by clients if only because of ease of access for 'wholistic' (sic) care including some physical interventions.

Parish nurses operate outside the constraints, and all too apparent strains of the NHS, so are free to practice spiritual and person-centred care and to explore fundamental issues in a person's life. Although arguably always part of a health professional's remit - and largely to do with a listening attitude - this is now too often honoured by its omission. The proscription by the NHS against enquiry into such matters and their meaning for individuals only serves to increase unmet needs.

Despite Wordsworth's research question, 'How far does parish nursing make a difference to the mission of an English Church?' with its evangelistic implications, Wordsworth's careful approach convinced this reader that far from assaulting the vulnerable with zeal, the mission of a vocational parish nurse could in fact enhance statutory community health services by promoting healthy living and supporting the vulnerable who fall between the cracks of the NHS. In the study, the author uncovers the value of faith groups in caring for people in the communities surrounding the churches by providing a holistic ministry to presenting needs, yielding a measure of mental illness prevention. She flags a concern about protection against spiritual abuse, although it is heartening to see that this is observed in several, though far from all, of the 15 parish nurse churches in this study. The provision of basic physical health checks can be a way to initiate conversations about health anxieties and psycho-social concerns. The great gift of parish nursing is time and patience borne of a care derived from genuine commitment to a practical Christian faith. This also expresses itself in the support, training and coordination of volunteers for practical services such as drop-in centres, befriending, gardening or decorating.

This is a comprehensive and well-researched overview by the founder of the charity 'Parish Nurse Ministries UK' (in 2003), showing the value and potential of parish nursing in this country. She pulls no punches with regard to her evangelical Christian inspiration and motivation for this task but nevertheless accepts the NMC code of practice to offer care to all, irrespective of beliefs, race or gender. Thus the offer to pray or raise issues of faith with clients must be made with absolute freedom of choice completely free from evangelistic coercion.

I commend this carefully crafted book with the hope that the mainstream churches might take up this vital task again. If parish nursing were to spread, it would be of inestimable complementary benefit to the NHS and reassert the place of the churches' service, currently largely hidden, within our communities.