

# NURSING THE BODY OF CHRIST

**A**fter graduating with her bachelor of nursing in 2011 and working a few years in palliative care, Janelda Cornfield of Sunrise Community Church, Edmonton, felt God leading her to work in a setting where she could be open about her faith. She approached pastor Dennis Wiens about starting a parish nursing ministry.

“A parish nurse addresses the needs of the community, inside and outside the church, in a holistic way,” Cornfield says, “physically, spiritually, mentally, and emotionally – through the lens of faith.”



Parish nurses don’t perform direct nursing care (e.g., changing dressings or administering injections), but offer support, education, and connection to medical resources and the church – “not only to the person who is ill, but the whole family unit,” she says.

Each parish nurse’s portfolio is different, depending on their gifts and the community’s needs. “I really enjoy working in end-of-life care and grief support,” says Cornfield, who holds Blue Christmas services for individuals struggling over the holidays and runs grief support groups that draw people from the surrounding community.

She also offers blood pressure clinics, seminars on stress management, and a weekly walking group. She has invited a lawyer to teach the importance of will preparation. People approach her after church with health questions.

With today’s smaller nuclear families, as people age, they may not have a loved one to support them, says Cornfield. “A parish nurse can attend doctor’s appointments to help them understand what the doctor is saying and advocate with them.”

## BRIDGING THE GAP

“Parish nursing provides a bridge to the church community,” says Margaret Fast, whose ministry at Grantham MB Church, St. Catharines, Ont., focuses on the churches’ 50-some seniors.

For those who can't get to church, Marg delivers bulletins every Sunday at the Mennonite-run care home, Tabor Manor, and updates them on the life of the congregation.

"The retired accountant always asked about the church finances," says Fast, and many respond to the bulletin's member news and upcoming events with "How can I pray?" "They are an active and appreciated part of our prayer ministry," she says.

These same members are also included in each month's communion service: they are mentioned from the table during the service, with Marg and pastor Michael VandenEnden bringing the elements later that afternoon.

When Fast retired from years of nursing education and administration in both Canada and Lithuania, a Grantham leader approached her to consider parish nursing training.


Fast appreciated the interdenominational aspect of her two-year course at St. Peter's College: learning from established parish nurses in Catholic, United, Presbyterian, and Pentecostal traditions about practices such as footwashing and structured prayer.

A long-time member of the deaconate, she became Grantham's parish nurse in 2010. Recently, she let her College of Nursing registration go, but continues in a volunteer caregiver role as head of the congregational care committee.

Fast's goal: "No Grantham senior shall be in the ER alone." She's the first to the hospital to wait with them until the family arrives or they are admitted. "It's comfortable – because we already have a relationship. That's what I enjoy most: developing positive relationships with shut-ins."

The work requires someone who's "interested in hearing faith stories – and sharing their own – and comfortable praying with people," says Fast.

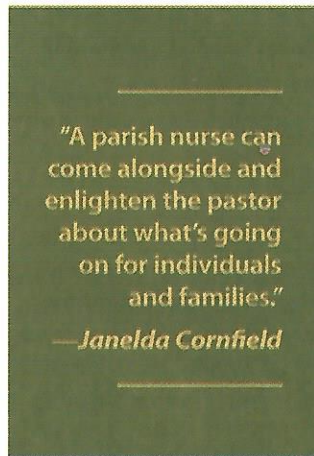
Cornfield has had the privilege of walking with families from the community who've lost children to suicide or overdose. "I've been able to sit with them over the period of two years, to give them that opportunity to talk about their loved ones, when the rest of society has forgotten and carried on with life," she says. "It's so important to keep that memory alive and give them that space to talk, to meet their need and then bring it before God."



The Canadian Association for Parish Nursing Ministry defines a parish nurse as "a registered nurse with specialized knowledge who is called to ministry and affirmed by a faith community to promote health, healing, and wholeness."



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—Janelda Cornfield



"Pastors can address the spiritual," says Cornfield, "but they may not understand how the physical ties into the spiritual. A parish nurse can come alongside and enlighten the pastor about what's going on for individuals and families. And alleviate their burden for visitation."

"A parish nurse conveys understanding and care *on behalf of the faith community*," says VandenEnden. "I have seen ill church members visibly put at ease when I say that Marg Fast has thoroughly explained their illness to me (with their permission) – it saves them from having to explain it, and their sense of isolation is decreased."

He stresses that parish nursing is not a service to individuals, but a ministry to the whole congregation: "Parish nursing addresses the barriers that can develop between healthy and ill members; it builds up the body of Christ into unity."

"I wish every church had a parish nurse," says Cornfield, someone to help them find health answers and support in times of pain, confusion, loneliness, and loss – "all from the perspective of bringing people to God."

"We're called by the Holy Spirit to be the body of Christ to others," says Fast. "That's what we're doing through our prayers and caregiving."

[Angeline Scheellenberg