

# Parish nursing offers boost to health services



By: [John Longhurst](#) Posted: 2:00 AM CST Saturday, Mar. 11, 2023

Manitoba needs as many as 2,000 more nurses to fill all the vacant positions. Emergency rooms are overloaded. Surgical wait times are up. Patients are waiting in hallways to be seen. The health-care system is at, or beyond, the breaking point.

And it could only get worse as the number of seniors rapidly grows. According to the province's Age-Friendly Manitoba Initiative, in 2019 close to 16 per cent of the population were 65 years and older. By 2028, that figure will rise to 31 per cent. Many of those will prefer to stay in their own homes as long as possible.

As the government put it: "As most older adults aged 65 and over live in the community, communities face opportunities and challenges in responding to their needs and desires."

That's an understatement.

There are various ideas being thrown around for ways to fix the problem, such as attracting more nurses from countries like the Philippines, or making it easier for foreign nationals to qualify to work in health care in the province.

One idea that I haven't seen come up is parish nursing.

Parish nursing is a concept pioneered in the U.S. in the 1980s. In a nutshell, it finds congregations employing health-care professionals, or utilizing retired nurses as volunteers, to attend to the needs of people in congregations or communities.

The goal of parish nursing is to focus on the whole person, including their spiritual well-being. Today there are thousands of parish nurses involved in faith-based settings around the world, including a few in Canada.

Parish nursing doesn't replace traditional health care. Instead, it serves to bolster and support it by keeping people, especially seniors, out of the health-care system as long as possible — keeping them healthy and well in their homes for as long as they can stay there.

In this country, the Canadian Association of Parish Nursing Ministries is a small organization that resources and supports parish nurses.

According to the organization, a parish nurse is a registered nurse who is affirmed by a faith community that validates their call to ministry.

The people they serve may belong to a congregation, but the circle of care can extend beyond it to the local community as well. Through parish nursing, people can achieve better health and be better able to cope with life's challenges and transitions.

Core competencies for parish nursing include the ability to assess and intervene with individuals, families, groups and communities; to make assessments about the physical, emotional, mental, social and spiritual dimensions of people's health; and the ability to promote positive health practices and behaviours.

In plain language, that can mean things like doing a basic checkup during a home visit, along with checking on medications — making sure people are taking them as prescribed — checking their fridge and cupboards to see how they are eating, and generally ensuring they are doing well enough to continue living independently at home.

If greater care is needed, parish nurses can make referrals for additional medical interventions, or link people with government or other agencies for different kinds of assistance. This could include being an advocate for them in the health-care system.

It could also be something as simple as learning during a visit that seniors are no longer able to do their own snow shovelling in winter, or yard care from spring to fall. They might also need rides to appointments or require small repairs to their homes — things that volunteers from a congregation could assist with.

Since many congregations have retired health-care professionals among their members, one model for parish nursing finds them volunteering for a few hours or few days each week to check in on seniors or other vulnerable people. It's a way for them to continue to use their skills and stay busy in a meaningful way when they still have energy to serve others.

I am not aware of any congregations currently offering parish nursing in Winnipeg. But parish nurses can be found in other parts of Canada.

For example, the Upper Ottawa Valley Parish Nurse Initiative (UOVPNI) Health Council has hired Melissa Jardine-Ridley as a full-time parish nurse with the designation of lay minister with the United Church of Canada.

The former military senior medical technician and paramedic will serve St. Andrew's United Church in Chalk River, and Wesley United and Calvin United Churches in Pembroke, providing services to those churches on a rotating basis.

Some Anglican churches in the country also have parish nurses on staff, but a search doesn't turn up any other denominations currently engaged in the practice.

Parish nursing will not solve the health-care crisis in Manitoba. But at a time when the province is rapidly aging and health needs are growing, every tool in the tool box is needed to address the growing need for health services.

Parish nursing might just be one of those tools.