

LIVING

The spirit of healing

Parish nursing treats the whole person - through talking, listening and just being there

BY NOREEN O'LEARY
CORRESPONDENT

One York Region church has taken helping its parish members one step further. Since February, Grace Anglican Church in Markham has been running a parish nursing program as a way of serving the physical, psychological and spiritual needs of its congregation.

"It's a holistic way of looking at the person," said Eileen Ashley, a parish nurse with Grace Church.

"Before, we always looked at just the physical and the emotional. Now, it's the whole person, and spirituality is at the centre of the practice."

Ashley brought parish nursing to Grace Church after reading an article about the program.

She contacted Inter-church Health Ministries, the Oshawa-based organization that controls parish nursing for all denominations throughout Ontario, made a presentation to the Grace Church advisory board and got the green light from there.

The Church as a Health Cabinet consists of 11 people, including a pharmacist and nurses, who help in the tasks that are involved with the program.

Volunteers from the congregation often assist families and individuals, talking with someone who's recently lost a loved one, driving an individual to the hospital for medical treatment or by simply making a casserole in a time of need.

"We also have people with no connection to health services," Ashley said.

"I've brought some people on who are very spiritual, and to me, they're really important."

The Health Cabinet provides many services for its congregation, as well as the community.

Cabinet members act as health educators, conducting programs to raise health awareness in the community.

Past topics have included prostate cancer, nutrition and medicines. Blood-pressure clinics are held every few months, usually between services, and healing and prayer workshops have also been offered.

'A church should be a place of health and healing and wholeness. You could not do this unless it was theologically and congregationally driven.'

Personal health counsellors are made available to discuss health problems and to recommend professional medical involvement when necessary.

Ashley acts as a referral source and liaison with congregational and community resources that provide social and medical support.

Home or hospital visits are also made by Ashley and the clergy, when appropriate.

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Ashley said she receives a lot of support from the parish.

"There are so many good people in this church, it's amazing," she said.

"A church should be a place of health and healing and wholeness. You could not do this unless it was theologically and congregationally driven."

She said there is usually a high demand for the personal counselling aspect of parish nursing. The majority of her work is done



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

Eileen Ashley brought parish nursing to her Markham church, and the congregation embraced the program with open arms.

from home, where she makes many of her follow-up phone calls.

"That's the wonderful thing about doing this," Ashley said.

"You can do one call at night or one call in the afternoon. You don't have to it all in a row."

Although the program involves no direct hands-on nursing, Ashley said it has proven to be very beneficial.

"It's important because of the ability to speak of spiritual things," said Ashley.

"As a nurse you were never allowed to do that. With this the whole person is included. If you have a lot of hate and unforgiveness, and you can get rid of that, your body will change too."

Ashley stressed that every aspect of parish nursing is individ-

ual, and confidentiality is extremely important.

Permission is always asked before involving doctors or counsellors.

She said interest in the program has maintained, and that every day is a learning experience.

So far, Grace Church is the only church in York Region involved in parish nursing, and the first to begin outside of Durham Region, according to Henry Fischer, execu-

tive director of the Inter-Church Health Ministries.

Since Fischer, along with three others, launched parish nursing in Durham congregations in 1993, he's had to double his staff.

The project has "exceeded expectations," and there are nearly 50 Ontario congregations involved in parish nursing, Fischer said.

Some of the most recent additions are as far away as London and Cobourg.

GETTING INVOLVED

Bringing more congregations on board is the goal of the organization

Congregations wishing more information, or to get involved, can call Inter-Church Health Ministries at (905) 436-1572.

Grace Church is presenting a health seminar on herbal medicines Jan. 20 at 7:30 p.m. All members of the community are welcome to attend.



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