



It Takes a Congregation

Health Ministry by Everyone, for Everyone

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COMMUNITIES OF FAITH ARE varied and diverse in their beliefs, traditions, missions, and membership, but they have one trait in common: congregations have built-in strengths for vibrant health ministries in an

environment that invites a wide range of people to participate. No matter how varied and diverse the settings, health ministry pulls on a common thread of service and interactive participation by many individuals with an array of talents.

The Health Ministries Association defines health ministry as “The promotion of health and healing as part of the mission and ministry of a faith community to its members and the community it serves.” Promoting health and healing is not the narrow gate that only admits physicians and nurses but a wide, open landscape that gladly receives participation from clergy and laity, paid staff and volunteers, children and senior citizens, gifts of financial support or life expertise. Congregations considering beginning a new ministry, or wondering how to sustain an established ministry, need not follow a particular set of instructions but rather may draw the map that helps set the course in a particular context.

Congregations can customize health ministry to fit the beliefs, traditions, and needs of those it will serve while also taking into account the gifts, talents, and resources of those who will provide ministry services. This includes individuals of all ages, families, groups that may gather around particular needs or interests, the faith community as a whole and the surrounding neighborhood. Assessing the ways that faith, life and need intertwine makes a good starting point and allows for the reality that the ministry changes over time to meet

shifting circumstances in the faith community or to respond to particular seasons of needs.

The concept of health ministry might stir up images of a retired nurse taking blood pressure readings after a worship service or a committee making sure that the families of members who fall ill have supper delivered for a few days. These examples do fall under health ministry, but the question of what health ministry might look like in a congregation is a question of imagination. Promoting health and healing for the whole person means that these topics—and many more—are health ministry:

- parenting classes
- first aid booth
- community health fair
- diabetes education classes
- support groups
- home visitation
- group walking activities
- healthy cooking classes
- intergenerational mentors
- prayer gatherings
- companionship during a physician visit

Clergy and Health Ministry

Health ministry, while varied and diverse, has a common thread of service and interactive participation by many individuals with a wide range of talents.

Clergy are a key element in health ministry not because they must personally carry out the activities associated with health ministry, but because the congregation looks to them as a guide to whether health ministry will be valued in that setting. Does the pastor preach about the healing ministry of Jesus? Does teaching about the good news include the health and value of the whole person, rather than only the soul? Do spiritual leaders set an example by being mindful of food choices, exercise opportunities, weight management, enriching relationships and living life in balance? Does the pastor make a point to speak of health ministry with enthusiasm? Clergy play a foundational role in a biblical basis for the *why* of health ministry.

In reality, many activities pastors already engage in would fall under the banner of health ministry: hospital visitation, spiritual counseling, or partnering with safety-net organizations with referrals or contributions. Clergy may also choose to participate as encouragers to those who actively provide health ministry to the faith community, viewing these lay leaders as valuable



members of the leadership team. While clergy encouragers do not necessarily actively provide direct health ministry services, their support is critical to the success of any health ministry program.

Some faith communities have dedicated health ministers who provide healing services and programs in the faith community. The health minister, along

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with a health ministry team, organizes activities that promote the relationship of faith and health as an important aspect of a life well lived. In other congregations, healthy ministry is led not by someone on staff but by laypersons working in collaboration with the pastoral staff. The work of the ministry team touches people across the age levels in the church and the variety of small groups, from Sunday school classes to youth groups, choirs, worship musicians, outreach teams, and the homebound.

Health Ministry Teams

One model that many congregations use for health ministry is including a faith community nurse—an actively licensed registered nurse with additional specialty practice training in spiritual care. Both paid and unpaid faith community nurses provide intentional care of the spirit to the members of a congregation as well as the surrounding community. Faith community nurses promote health in all aspects of a person's life including physical, spiritual, mental,

social, financial, and environmental. These nurses not only understand and assist people to navigate through the current health care system but also have advanced spiritual care training customized to the religion and denomination they serve. This combined expertise in medical and spiritual care provides a more whole-life approach to health. Faith community nurses also are a valuable resource for outreach services to underserved populations. They assist individuals, families, and groups in the general community to move toward a healthy lifestyle grounded in a community of faith.

A faith community nurse may lead or be a part of a wider health ministry team. Health ministry volunteers—known as health advocates, health champions, health companions or by other titles—may be a mix of people with medical backgrounds and those with other gifts that help to sustain a ministry. This mix can include licensed practical or vocation nurses and retired nurses (without licensure), physicians, and other professionals with an expertise in a specific aspect of health, such as nutrition, exercise, healthy cooking or stress reduction. Other health advocates may provide services such as home visitation, transportation, leadership for support groups or one of the many other services needed for a health ministry to thrive and grow. In addition, health advocates may also support the health ministry through organizational skills, publicity, or monetary and in-kind donations of goods or services. Health advocate volunteers may also

provide prayer support or advocate for the health ministry in the community and within the denomination or to the religious leadership.

A Role for Everyone

The general membership of the faith community, especially those who receive health ministry services, are important players in ongoing health ministry. For instance, simply sharing personal stories helps promote a ministry of health and healing. And when one person's health is improved because of health ministry, it affects the individual's friends and family as well. Catching a dangerous blood pressure reading at a Sunday clinic protects the whole family from the possibility of a health crisis for their loved one. A parenting class that addresses a mother's struggle with a puzzling child can change the tone of the entire household. Someone sharing a struggle with depression helps create an environment where it is safe for others to talk about mental illness. In this way, health ministry is by everyone, for everyone.

Both within and beyond the church walls, congregations provide a strong foundation of spiritual heritage that supports the outreach of those who provide health ministry services. Support through participation, tithes, prayers, and by promoting awareness of the services available to the community is vital to the continued development of health ministry.

Each health ministry is unique in structure and in function in order to appropriately meet the needs of those served. Each may have a different makeup of service providers and provide a wide variety of services, but all health ministries seek to improve the overall life experience of those they touch in holistic ways.

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