



United Methodist Committee On Relief



Photo: Jeffrey Austin/UMCOR

**Introduction to  
Health Ministry  
for  
United Methodist Congregations**

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## **Introduction to Health Ministry For United Methodist Congregations**

This booklet from UMCOR Health is designed to provide practical tools in developing an effective health ministry within your local congregation. It offers ideas, how-to's, terminology, basic health-ministry models, resources, and creative ways to help finance a health ministry.

### **Health Ministry Is Holistic**

The church brings a holistic\* perspective to a community's understanding of health because it has the ability to address and integrate all elements of healing—body, mind, and spirit. As United Methodists, we believe the human body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, a sacred place consecrated by God's presence. People who believe that the body is a gift and the dwelling place of God will treat it with great care. This positive aspect of spirituality will lead to healthy behavior and thinking as health ministers promote prevention and overall wellness to congregations and communities alike.

Most health problems are related to lifestyle and are preventable. Research on the immune system and other health studies have identified hope, religious belief, a purpose in life, a sense of connectedness to others (both individuals and small groups), a positive self-image, and love to be important factors toward good health. The church is a strategic place where all of these elements of holistic health and healing can be discussed and nurtured.

*\*Holistic Health Scriptural References: 1 Corinthians 6:19; Luke 4:18-19; Romans 8:22-23; Matthew 25:31-46; James 5:13-18; Luke 10:25-37.*

## Theology of Health and Healing

In the early 17th century, John Wesley established for today's United Methodist the precedent of holistic health, emphasizing the interconnecting of spiritual, mental, environmental, financial, and physical well-being.

In his book *Primitive Physic* and his sermons, John Wesley preached about the restoration of the soul through inward and outward health—nurturing our souls and bodies. His concern for holistic health extended to the whole community, and he spoke often of the need for “good food, clean water and air, and exercise.” He saw persons not as isolated individuals but as living in relationship with God, other people, and the whole of creation.

*“Discipleship under Jesus Christ is holistic,  
both spiritual and physical, and  
following Jesus requires our whole selves;  
the healthier we are, the more able we are  
to be about the will of God.”*

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Rev. Chris Owens,  
First United Methodist Church  
in Laurel, Maryland

Wesley's commitment to health was strongly influenced by the New Testament stories of Jesus' healing of the sick and care of the outcasts. He visited the sick in their homes and set up a free church-based public dispensary. Wesley and the circuit riders distributed thousands of copies of *Primitive Physic* as they traveled.

## **Models of Health Ministry**

There are many models of health ministry. It is important that the ministry be customized to serve the specific needs of a congregation and the community it serves. Four basic models of congregation-based health ministries provide effective structures for the development of a health ministry. Each model emphasizes holistic health for the individual as well as the community. The models are not mutually exclusive, but include the following structures:

**1. Parish/Faith Community Nurse or a team of nurses** are members of the church staff who help coordinate the health ministry for the congregation and surrounding community. They may work:

- Paid or unpaid.
- Full-time or part-time.
- For one church or be shared by several churches.
- Individually or in teams.

**2. Health Advocates** coordinate health ministry in congregations without parish/faith community nurses. Health advocates are usually volunteers who focus on specialist areas. Health Advocates include:

- Retired registered nurses.
- Licensed vocational/practical nurses.
- Allied health professionals such as social workers, therapists, pharmacists, nutritionists, and other licensed professionals.
- Lay health professionals such as exercise coaches.
- Others interested in holistic health.

- 3. Healing Congregations** are congregations that engage in a holistic health program.
- 4. Participatory Health** is a group in need that analyzes its problems and develops its own solutions.

*“Carol translates the medical rigmarole —  
I don’t know what the church  
would do without her.”*

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Mary Jane, a member of  
Hughes United Methodist Church in Wheaton, Maryland,  
speaking about Carol Whitney,  
a faith-community nurse for Hughes UMC

## **Guidelines for Health Committees**

**The Health Committee** is a subcommittee of the church council and is comprised of people interested in the holistic health and welfare of the congregation and its surrounding community. Members of already established specialty ministries such as Stephen Ministries and youth and elderly ministries are included as partners with health ministry. While it is important that the pastor assist in the development and support of the health committee’s goals, it is the laity’s responsibility to chair the committee. The committee must be able to continue the work of health ministry, knowing that pastors are frequently reassigned.

**Health Committees** are vital to support and guide the health ministry of a congregation as they work to encourage and empower people to develop and share their gifts and talents to serve others. It is a group effort that holistically improves the health of the server as well as those being served.

## **Responsibilities of Health Committees**

- Plan and recruit leaders.
- Select and support a parish nurse and/or team of parish nurses or health advocates.
- Develop policies and guidelines for the health ministry aligned with conference and denominational guidelines.
- Assist with introduction and promotion of health ministry to the congregation.
- Provide support and direction by setting obtainable goals.
- Assist leaders/parish nurse in selecting and providing appropriate programs and activities.
- Monitor programs and leaders for quality and need.
- Evaluate all leaders and programs annually and make recommendations, necessary changes, or modifications to enhance or strengthen the ministry.
- Report regularly to the church council.

## Getting Started

Below are some important how-to's and specific checkpoints to consider when developing a health ministry. We encourage you to:

- Pray for discernment and guidance.
- Visit your pastor, district superintendent, and other leaders in your church about your call to health ministry.
- Explore the UMCOR Health parish nurse website, the International Parish Nurse Resource Center website, and the Health Ministries Association website for resources, educational offerings, and networks in your area.
- Check with your conference office regarding a parish nurse/health ministry coordinator in your conference.
- Develop a health ministry committee with the assistance of the pastor and church council.
- Work with the health ministry committee to define, describe, plan, and promote your health ministry.
- Assess available and potential resources such as funds, materials, personnel, and partners.
- Survey the health needs and interests of the congregation, or visit various groups such as Sunday school classes, youth groups, or other health-related programs already in place.
- Implement your plan.
- Network with other parish nurses, health advocates, congregations, denominations, or organizations in your community for ideas, support, and potential partnerships for serving your congregation and community.
- Evaluate your mission, activities, and effectiveness regularly.

## Examples of Health Ministry Programs and Services

Following are just a few examples of the many types of programs and services that might be provided by parish/faith community nursing/health ministries. It is critical to customize all programs and services to fit the needs of the congregation being served as well as the abilities and resources of the providers. Clergy health support is also a part of health ministry.

**Disease and injury prevention** such as healthy-heart lifestyle classes, home-safety checks, or blood-pressure screenings.

**Emotional and spiritual health** such as stress management, grief and loss support, or teachings on the relationship between faith and health.

**Family health** programs that address parenting, care for aging parents, or emergency preparedness.

**Volunteer training** that includes CPR/First Aid, home visitation, blood-pressure screeners, or Stephen Ministers.

*“It is important for United Methodists  
to be aware of the opportunities they have  
to develop this type of ministry.  
We often forget that part of being disciples  
is caring for our  
bodies as a temple of God.”*

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Patricia Magyar,  
UMCOR Health Executive

## **Financing Health Ministry Programs and Services**

There are many ways to finance a health ministry. Be creative and flexible! Explore the possibilities for funding and don't hesitate to ask. Here are a few suggestions to get started:

- Pray.
- Develop a working budget based on goals.
- Consider sources within your congregation such as individuals, groups, or classes that support similar projects. Consider members of community organizations such as Rotary, Kiwanis, or Lion's clubs.
- Request memorial donations and honorariums.
- Check with the district and annual conference regarding seed money and additional funding for education or other programs.
- Research the grant funders in your area.
- Schedule fundraisers.

## **Health Ministry Definitions**

**Health Ministry:** A purposeful ministry that helps individuals, families, groups, congregations, and communities focus on holistic health, wellness, and disease and injury prevention. Health ministry is usually directed by a health committee incorporating a parish/faith community nurse or health advocate and customized to fit the needs of a specific congregation.

**Parish Nurse/Faith Community Nurse:** A registered nurse with active licensure in the state of practice with advanced training in spiritual care from an accredited educational provider such as the International Parish Nurse Resource Center. Parish/faith community nurses provide spiritual care as they serve congregations and the surrounding community. Roles may include activities such as health counselor, health educator, health advocate, and resource and referral agent for community services. The practice is customized to fit the unique needs of each congregation.

**Health Advocate:** Retired registered nurses, licensed vocational/practical nurses, allied health professionals, lay health professionals, or others interested in holistic health who provide health ministry in an area related to their specific expertise. Health advocates may work in conjunction with a parish/faith community nurse or may work under the direction of a health committee.

**Structure of the United Methodist Denomination:** The local church is a member of a district. Districts are members of an annual conference. Annual conferences are members of a jurisdiction. There may or may not be a parish nurse/health ministry coordinator at each of these levels. At the denomination level, parish nursing/health ministry is a division of UMCOR Health.

*“Educated pastors are helpful advocates  
in developing a health ministry.  
Once they understand the  
ways that a faith community nurse  
can be the eyes and ears  
in the community and work in  
synergy with their ministry,  
most are enthusiastic to support the  
program in the local church.”*

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Julie Taylor, faith community nurse for  
Pathways United Methodist Church  
in Springfield, Missouri

## Resources

### Internet

United Methodist Parish Nurses and Health Advocates  
[www.umcorhealth.org](http://www.umcorhealth.org)

International Parish Nurse Resource Center  
[www.parishnurses.com](http://www.parishnurses.com)

Health Ministries Association  
[www.HMAAssoc.org](http://www.HMAAssoc.org)

### Printed Materials

American Nurses Association & Health Ministries Association (2006). *Faith Community Nursing: Scope and Standards of Practice*. Silver Springs, MA. ANA. ISBN 978-55810-228-6.

IPNRC (2002). *The Health Cabinet: How to Start a Wellness Committee in Your Church*. International Parish Nurse Resource Center.

McNamara, Jill Westberg (2006). *Health and Wellness: What Your Faith Community Can Do*. Pilgrim Press. ISBN 978-0829-817409.

Patterson, Deborah (2008). *Health Ministries: A Primer for Clergy and Congregations*. Pilgrim Press. ISBN 978-0-8298-1791-1.

Wesley, John (2003). *Primitive Physic: An Easy and Natural Method of Curing Most Diseases*. WIPF & Stock. ISBN-13: 9781592442584.

**For More Information, contact:**

Patricia Magyar  
UMCOR Health  
Executive Secretary  
475 Riverside Drive, Room 330  
New York, NY 10115  
Tel: 212-870-3683  
pmagyar@gbgm-umc.org

Sharon T. Hinton  
Parish Nurse Consultant  
2750 County Road 260  
Floydada, TX 79235  
Tel: 806-983-8096  
coordinator@ruralnursersource.com

To subscribe to the United Methodist Parish Nurse Interactive Mailing List, visit [www.umcorhealth.org](http://www.umcorhealth.org) and click on Parish Nursing.

Congregational Health Ministries  
[www.umcorhealth.org](http://www.umcorhealth.org)

