



# **The Faith Community Nurse role is an important function of church ministry**

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# Contents

## Introduction

1. Why health, healing and pastoral care are part of the church's ministry
2. A Christian view of health
3. The links between faith and health
4. Modern nursing's history

## References

## About the Author

## About the Australian Faith Community Nurses Association (AFCNA)



# Introduction

Understanding why Faith Community Nursing is an important role within today's Christian churches requires some exploration of:

1. why health, healing and pastoral care are part of the church's ministry;
2. what a Christian view of health looks like;
3. the links between faith and health; and
4. modern nursing's history.

# 1. Why health, healing and pastoral care are part of the church's ministry



*"Great crowds came to him (Jesus) bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them."* Matthew 15:30.<sup>1</sup>

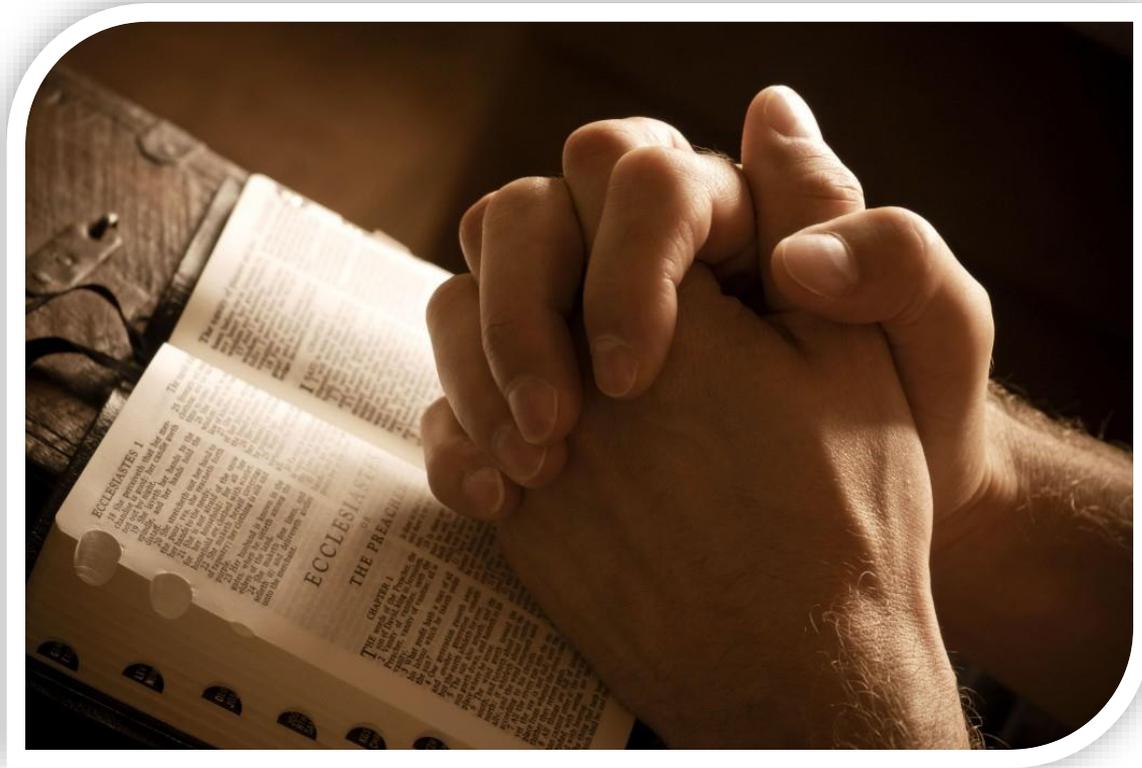
Healing activities were a large part of Jesus' ministry. He healed people from various conditions and that healing was physical, mental and spiritual in nature, enabling people to be restored to their community, and God to be glorified.

Jesus instructed the disciples to go and *"preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick"* (Luke 9:2).<sup>2</sup> Jesus' healing work continues today through the Church (John 14:12), and as followers of Jesus, we are called to follow His example.

The Christian church has a long history of active involvement in health and healing ministries. To this day it is actively involved in tertiary health care through hospitals. It is involved in secondary health care via community care services, aged care facilities, pastoral care activities that demonstrate compassion, concern and a desire to restore people to health. However, the church is almost absent from the primary health care aspect of the health continuum, which focuses on preventing injury, abuse and disease, and promoting and empowering personal and community health.

Much Christian health care today is focused on acute care hospitals which are run using business models that can be difficult to distinguish from their secular counterparts. These medical models fragment the care of the whole person and are necessarily disease-focused, often forgetting the other dimensions of human life that are impacted by illness.

While it is important to prevent, cure and manage disease, the focus of healing is restoration to wholeness in all the human dimensions, through Jesus Christ. Consequently, even in the absence of cure from disease, healing can occur.<sup>3</sup>



Curing disease may not be possible, but healing always remains possible because the person finds their wholeness in and through Jesus Christ. In this way death becomes the ultimate healing, because as Christians we pass from this life into eternal life, where we are made whole in Jesus Christ!<sup>4</sup>  
To understand this more let's look at what the Bible says about health.

## 2. A Christian View of Health



A Christian worldview perceives health as a dynamic state within the person that is held in balance by maintaining and nurturing relationships within the person (body, mind and spirit), between the person and God, between the person and other people, between the person and the creation/environment.<sup>5</sup>

For the Christian, health is not an essential end goal, but it can enable the person to fulfil God's purpose for their life. It is God's desire that all people would experience a full and abundant life through Jesus Christ (John 10:10), but because of sin - sickness, injury and abuse are part of our life experience in this world. They were never a part of God's original plan, but God can and does use them to fulfil His purposes.<sup>6</sup>

Health involves a dynamic transformation of behaviours and patterns of living in all of the dimensions (body, mind, soul and spirit) that move the person from brokenness to wholeness through Jesus Christ. This reconciliation process or healing, is a lifelong journey which draws us ever closer to Jesus Christ. The good news is that healing is God's gracious free gift, and it is accessible to every person by having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup>

Each person's journey is unique and it is always affected by their relationship to other people, to the creation/environment, and to God. Out of these relationships humans experience *shalom*, a sense of completeness, wholeness, wellbeing, and peace.<sup>8</sup> I'm sure you will agree that this is a good description of health!

God created humans to live in relationship, therefore loving and just relationships are integral to good health. People enter and leave this world dependent on other people, and the relationships we develop and nurture between life's entry and exit, give our lives meaning and purpose. These are essential aspects of good mental and spiritual health.



The Hebrew word '*Shalom*' approximates the contemporary concept of holistic health, providing deep inner peace and wellbeing within the whole person, integration into family and community.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. The links between faith and health



To gain an understanding of the biblical basis for the relationship between faith and health it is useful to consider the links between healing and salvation.

In Greek translations of the Old Testament, the word *sodzo*, meaning to *save*, is translated to *be made well*, or translated as 'heal' in one third of its usages in the gospels.<sup>10</sup> (See examples in Mark 5: 23, Luke 8:36.) However this single Greek word has been translated in English using two words - *save* and *heal*.<sup>11</sup>

Such translation has created distinctions that have been intensified by the Greek philosophical worldview that separates body and soul. This separation continues today via two discrete disciplines: medicine which focuses on healing and caring of the physical body, and religion which focuses on saving and caring for the soul.<sup>12</sup>

The Old Testament word *ho io menos* means the *Healing One* and is translated *so ter*, which means *Saviour* in the New Testament.<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, *soteria* involves more than than physical healing, it also includes the concept of salvation. In summary, healing and salvation are closely related aspects of the same concept which involve saving, salving, healing, restoring, and to make whole that which is disrupted.<sup>14</sup>



It becomes easier to see the links between faith and health when we examine Jesus' ministry, which fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies of healing and *shalom*. In Jesus Christ our healing and our salvation are assured, but this does not imply healing is by faith alone, nor by tending the body alone, rather it entails *caring* for the whole person, body and soul, and the person's relationships, within self, with others, with the creation, and with God.<sup>15</sup>

The Bible does not specifically use the word 'care'. Rather it invites people to hand over their worries (*merimna*) to God's providence as a part of the healing process (see Matthew 6:24-34).<sup>16</sup> Healing is of the whole person, not just the spirit, consequently, pastoral care needs to extend to the provision of physical care of the body, support of the mind, and nurture of the spirit, through a variety of activities that facilitate healing of the whole person.<sup>17</sup>

We also see that Jesus' healing ministry is discussed in one fifth to one third of the gospels. The purpose of those healing activities was to demonstrate that Jesus was the embodiment of God's kingdom on earth (Mark 1:14-15) to proclaim that God's reign on earth had arrived.<sup>18</sup>

Illness is not always cured. However, Jesus promises all people can be healed. That means they can draw closer to God and find their wholeness in Jesus Christ who restores them back to wholeness through his death and resurrection. Illness is not God's will, nor is it the direct result of an individual's wrong-doing, as the story of Job illustrates. However God may allow it, and God can and does use illness to achieve His divine purpose. Therefore God expects His followers to respond to illness with compassion, grace and mercy, and never with judgement.<sup>19</sup>

Jesus' healing ministry culminates at Calvary, where as the suffering servant, he is crucified, taking upon himself our sins and our sickness, so that all of our diseases can be healed and our salvation is assured (Matthew 8:17; Isaiah 53:4). *'The cross represents not only the death of sin, but also the death of sickness, not only salvation of the soul, but also the healing of the body'*.<sup>20</sup>

Because of Jesus' death and resurrection healing and salvation have become God's gifts which are freely available to all. Showering these gifts on the world is the role of the church!



Jesus' healing ministry is now his followers' shared work with God (see John 9:1-41). Jesus returned to his disciples after his resurrection and they were given power to preach the kingdom of God, to forgive sin, and to heal the sick (see the book of Acts for many examples).

The gift of healing may be expressed by *the laying on of hands*, *anointing the sick with oil*, and *prayer*. The importance of prayer and forgiveness of sins in the healing process is highlighted in James 5:13-16.

God's healing power has been passed on to followers of Jesus Christ, and they are told that they will do greater works than Jesus did (John 14:12) because they are now empowered by the Holy Spirit of God, to be instruments of God's healing in the world today (John 20:22).

Therefore the healing work of Jesus continues through his incarnation, the Christian church. The New Testament relationship between salvation and healing is one of participation in the salvation/healing process rather than a singular healing experience.<sup>21</sup> “Healing is a part of the process of living”.<sup>22</sup>

Healing is a progressive response to God's irresistible lure toward perfect wholeness and peace that comes from a life lived with God. This peace and fullness is brought about by knowing God participates with each person, and the whole of humanity, in their suffering. God is still actively working to restore and care for His world, helping people actualise their potential and fulfil His purpose. He wants His church to participate with Him in this endeavour. Jesus clearly summarises the focus of His ministry and therefore as followers of Jesus, our ministry, when he says;

*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4:18-19 NIV)*



*“The health and wholeness to which Jesus calls people is not simply restoration of function or restored equilibrium or the elimination of the symptoms of disease. He invites people to a life of service to both God and humanity... This is the significance of Jesus' asking his followers to take up his cross.”<sup>23</sup>*

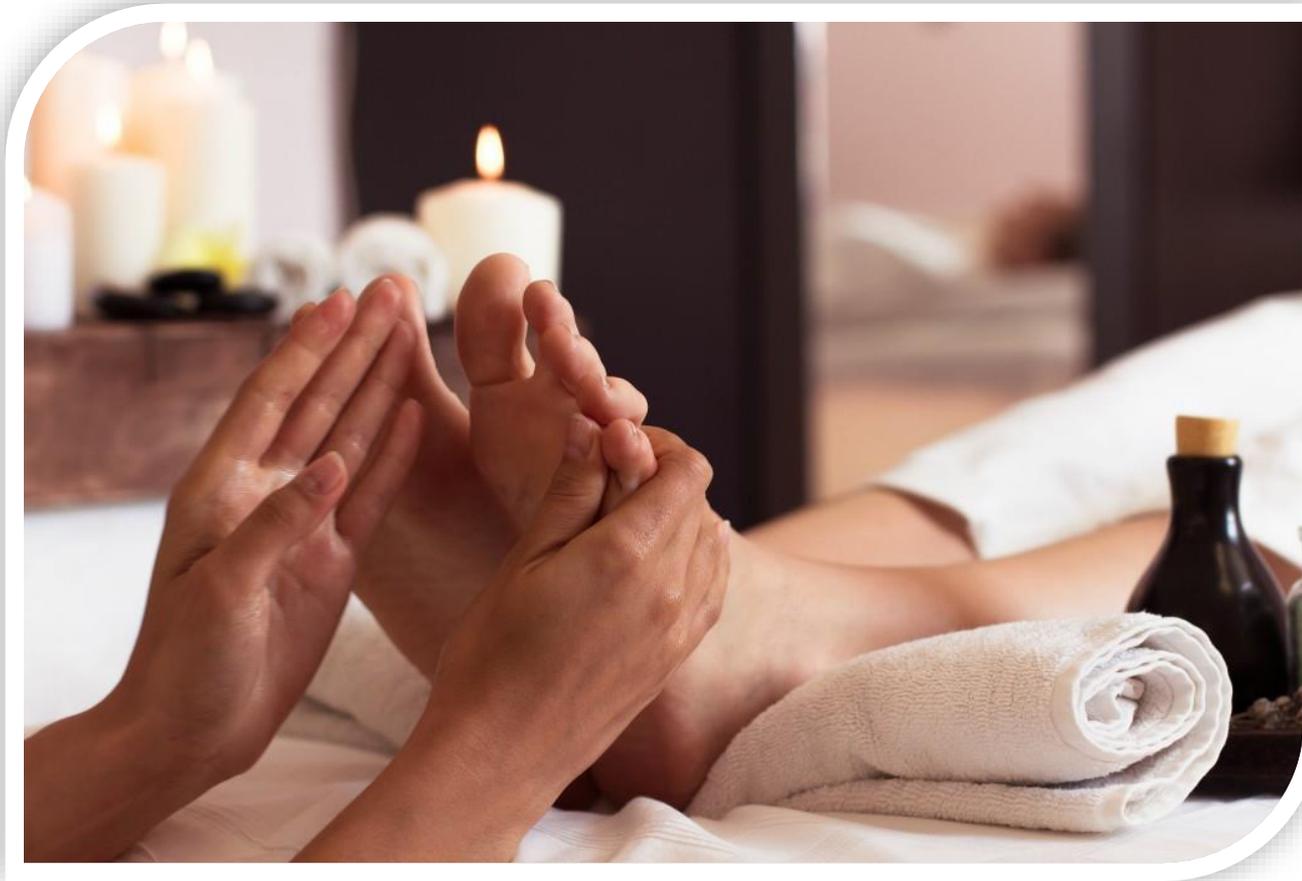
As a Christian Jesus invites you to take up his cross within your profession and personal life. For those of you in the health professions Jesus is asking you to practice your profession through the lens of your Christian faith.

## 4. Modern Nursing's History



Modern nursing has its roots in the deaconess role of the early Christian church and the religious orders of Roman Catholic and Protestant sisters in later centuries.<sup>24,25,26</sup>

The vocational call to Nursing is documented throughout Christian history starting in the Bible with Phoebe of Cenchrea (60 AD), who opened her home to care for the sick (Romans 16:1-2). Throughout history it has waxed and waned according to the various interpretations of the church concerning disease, suffering and the human body. However, nurses have continued to work on behalf of the church to care for the sick, the poor and the marginalised. Nurses continue to play an active part in the health, healing and pastoral care ministry of today's Christian churches as deacons, deaconesses and faith community nurses. God continues to call people to serve Him as Nurses today.<sup>27</sup>



Is God calling you into a faith community nursing role in your church community so that His healing work can continue today?

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## About the author



Anne van Loon commenced nursing in 1974. She has worked for around a decade in each of the following areas: clinical nursing in Accident & Emergency; teaching nursing in the tertiary sector at University of South Australia and Flinders University; health research with vulnerable populations via RDNS community nursing organisation; and her current role with Baptist Care, a not for profit Christian community service organisation, is to develop Christian churches that provide effective support and care for the most vulnerable in their community. Health & Care ministries provide the structure for churches to engage with their community via activities that promote health and wellbeing, prevent disease/injury/abuse and provide compassionate care and empowering support when it is appropriate. Faith Community Nurses are a natural and powerful fit in those ministry areas.

Anne is passionate about the life-giving capacity of a healthy faith community to transform lives. Her desire is to see churches reflect Christ's inclusive embrace to the most marginalised. She believes nurses can play a vital role in the provision of quality support and is eager to see more churches consider faith community nurses as part of their pastoral care and health ministries. To that end, Anne produced a model of faith community nursing in her doctoral studies, and founded the Australian Faith Community Nurses Association, the peak professional body in Australia for nurses working in faith community settings. Anne continues to serve AFCNA as their current Chairperson and invites you to join AFCNA as we seek to promote the FCN role and it's health, healing and pastoral care activities in your faith community.

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## About AFCNA

Contemporary faith community nursing is growing all over the world. The late Rev. Granger Westberg, a Lutheran Pastor and strong advocate of holistic health care, introduced parish nursing to the USA in the 1980s. Westberg realised that nurses had broad knowledge across the health disciplines, which provided the requisite professional linkages between the church and the health system that promoted care of the whole person. There are now over 15,000 registered nurses involved in faith community nursing in the USA. The role is flourishing across the globe in Asia, Africa, Europe, UK, the Pacific island with new countries commencing FCN roles each year.

AFCNA commenced in 1976 to provide FCNs working in faith communities with education, support, professional development and networking opportunities. AFCNA seeks to promote the FCN role and enable nurses to work effectively in the Christian faith community and the geographic, or cultural community that group serves. AFCNA supports nurses and the faith communities where they serve providing health, healing and pastoral care activities.

AFCNA is an ecumenical group and is not aligned to any specific denomination. It supports other denominational networks within Australia and seeks to work ecumenically with all Christian churches in a spirit of unity and cooperation.

AFCNA welcomes membership from nurses, pastors, priests and interested community members. [Click here](#) for more information.