



feature

## nursing as a Christian ministry

'The uniqueness of Christ-inspired nursing lies in its emphasis on caring for the whole person as embodied, respecting each person as created in the image of God. It is both a science and an art, but primarily it is a response to God's grace and a reflection of his character.'

Shelley and Miller <sup>1</sup>

**O**f all the professions, nursing has one of the strongest claims to being rooted almost uniquely in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet, modern nursing today is very much distanced in its language, theory and philosophy from Christianity. Likewise, most churches do not seem to have space for nursing as a ministry or as an expression of the mission of the church to proclaim the Good News to the whole of creation (Mark 16:15). This was not always the case. But how can nursing, as a profession, be a ministry of the church? And how can we carry out Christian ministry in our hospital, clinic or community practice?

Jesus made it clear that to be his disciples we need to be engaged with the pain and suffering of a fallen, sinful creation. It is not enough to sit back and watch, we are called to get involved, to get our hands dirty helping the suffering and the lost. In Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus judges those who call on his name based on the care they show to people in need – the poor, the stranger, the sick and the imprisoned. More than that, to care for people in need was

to care for Jesus himself – it was an act of Christian worship (see also Galatians 6:10). We are all made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Therefore – regardless of any other factors, such as age, race, gender, sexuality or social class – we are all worthy of the same respect and care. God has given us all value and dignity, but we are also all sinners in need of God’s grace and forgiveness. No one is ultimately any better or worse than any other. So then, we are also called not to judge others, but to first recognise our own sinfulness and need of forgiveness (Luke 6:37).

Each person we encounter has been made for a relationship with God – a relationship that has been broken by human sin, but that can be made right and reconciled through Jesus’ death on the cross. In other words, despite the fallen nature and sin of our patients and colleagues (and our own), each one of us has a longing for God (because that is what we were designed for), but which we can’t satisfy apart from Jesus. So part of our role is to present Christ to others, in action and words. We care not just for our patients’ bodies (although this isn’t unimportant,

1. Shelley JA, Miller AB. *Called to Care: A Christian Worldview for Nursing*, 2nd ed. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006

1 Corinthians 15); not for just their minds or social situations (though both are of great importance as well); but we also care about their spiritual needs, their need for meaning and significance, purpose, reconciliation and forgiveness – which is found only in Jesus Christ.

Care and compassion is a direct outworking of God's character. This was lived out by Jesus. Through sending Jesus, God himself became human. He experienced the same things we do – Jesus wept, experienced thirst, hunger, tiredness and can sympathise with our weakness. Ultimately he became a servant, taking the punishment we deserve through his death on the cross (Philippians 2:5-11). When confronted with people in need (spiritual or physical), Jesus was moved to compassion (Mark 8:1-8; Luke 7:11-15). In each case his compassion led to action that transformed the situation. On the cross, Jesus showed compassion in its most selfless form: he chose to lay down his life for our salvation.

Furthermore, we need to remember that God made us and has given us everything we have. Therefore, all aspects of our lives, including our gifts, skills and work belong to him. So whether we work for a church or a secular employer, Paul reminds us that 'whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working

for the Lord, not for human masters' (Colossians 3:23). We should be seeking to serve God by working to the best of our ability in whatever we're doing.

In living out the Good News of Jesus in our work, it is not just what we do and how we do it that matters. It also the sort of person that we are as a result of our relationship with Jesus. It is about our character, which as Christians should be one marked by the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22).

## care and compassion is a direct outworking of God's character

Finally, we work not in isolation, but as part of a body (1 Corinthians 12:27). Jesus does not just save us as individuals, but the Father has adopted us into his family (Romans 8:14-17). We are there to encourage one another, equip one another, point one another to Jesus in our lives, correct one another, and together reflect Jesus to the whole world (John 13:35; 1 Thessalonians 5:11).

# how does this work out in practice?

- 1. Caring as worship** – caring for our patients as if physically caring for Jesus himself. Our nursing practice grows out of, and in direct response to, our relationship with God. Keeping our spiritual lives healthy is a vital part of our nursing practise.
- 2. Caring as service** – laying down power and privilege to serve sinful humanity as Jesus did (Philippians 2:5-11). We seek to serve others, out of the same sense of service-as-worship, going beyond the basic requirements of our job description and professional codes to give Christ-like service to those in our care.
- 3. Unconditional, patient-centred care** – because as Christians we believe that every human being is made in the image of God, we can know that each individual has value and dignity. This applies to how we relate to and work with our colleagues as well as how we care for our patients and their families.
- 4. Caring for the whole person** – caring for bodily, psychosocial and spiritual needs of each patient as needed, in recognition that Christ values our physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing.
- 5. Caring in community** (or for one another) – both the relationships with our secular colleagues and with fellow Christians. With our non-Christian colleagues we need to show care, support and professional accountability of highest order. So that we are ‘doing what is right in the eyes of everyone. If is possible, as far as it depends on you, live and peace with everyone’ (Romas 23-17-18). With our Christian colleagues, we need to recognise our dependence on God in prayer, reading Scripture and reflecting on God’s Word with others. We need a godly community around us to help us live out our faith in the workplace every day, whatever that community might look like.

Steve Fouch

This article originally appears as a chapter in the new CMF book, *Lighting the Way: a handbook for Christian nurses & midwives*