

Thoughts on Christian Nursing

by Grace Tazelaar, MS, RN

I commonly hear these sayings: *"A nurse is a nurse is a nurse."* *"Once a nurse, always a nurse."* *"Nurses are the backbone of the healthcare system."* As a profession, it's clear that nursing is highly respected.

However, I often find myself having to promote or defend nursing to my colleagues in the healthcare professions and to those who are not part of the healthcare industry. I wonder why such a highly regarded profession is often overlooked and misunderstood.

Certainly, the profession has evolved considerably over the forty plus years that I have been involved in it. I often tell young nursing students that my entire career took a twist when I found myself in Uganda during an AIDS pandemic. The disease was unknown when I entered nursing and suddenly it became the focus of my work. The rise of AIDS led me into public health rather than the medical-surgical nursing specialty of my master's degree. I experienced one of nursing best aspects: it is adaptable. The principles learned in basic nursing education provide a foundation for lifelong learning and practice in areas that will change with time.

There are many definitions of nursing. I particularly like the one that my colleagues Judy Shelly and Arlene Miller wrote in their book [*Called to Care*](#). **"Christian nursing is a ministry of compassionate care for the whole person, in response to God's grace toward a sinful world, which aims to foster optimum health (*shalom*) and bring comfort in suffering and death for anyone in need."**

My email inbox and my conversations at healthcare mission conferences often lead to requests for a Christian nurse. When I ask what it is they are looking for in a nurse, I hear, "a nurse is a nurse is a nurse." They are looking for someone to do whatever it is that needs to be done. They think that nurses are good, kind, caring people who do whatever it takes. Therefore, they need and want a nurse.

While many nurses will go the extra mile in caring for others, they are more than "go-fors." Nurses are educated to assess, plan, implement and evaluate the health and care of people whom God has entrusted to them. Some are called to highly technical areas of healthcare like intensive care units, emergency care, or surgery. Others are called to care for the needs of emotionally ill people. Some are gifted in caring for children, some in caring for the elderly. Some practice nursing in hospitals and clinics, others in communities or churches. Some are teachers of nurses or administrators and leaders. Some advanced practice nurses diagnose and treat common illnesses, or practice as midwives or anesthetists. Nurses do become specialized in their practice areas of nursing as they provide care and get skilled in those areas.

When I attended a meeting at my alma mater, one of my former students came with me and apologized that she was no longer a nurse. Her health and other factors had led her to the

decision not to renew her nursing license. Dr. Beth Brooks, President of the University, told her, "That doesn't mean you are no longer a nurse. Once a nurse, always a nurse! The thought processes that you learn in nursing are used throughout life." I had to agree.

Over the years, nursing has developed in caring for the whole person, not just the physical dimension, but also the other aspects of life, including the spiritual dimension. Once a fellow nurse told me I was no longer in nursing because I wasn't working in a hospital but was actively promoting health for the poor and underserved. I was grateful that my coworker and friend, Dr. Sandra Jamison, rebuked her by saying, "What do you mean by saying Grace isn't nursing? What she is doing is the essence of nursing!" Even though hospital technology may have advanced while I was working in population health, it didn't mean I was no longer a nurse.

Some of my missionary physician friends tell me, "You nurses are the backbone of healthcare." They say this to encourage me when I have once again had to remind their colleagues that nursing has been overlooked. Those who have seen nurses on the mission field often comment that nurses have provided the leadership in community health development or have been the administrators that have kept the mission hospitals and clinics operational. They may have served as teachers for the national nursing staff or started the nursing schools in parts of the world where healthcare resources were limited.

Yet, nurses are rarely invited to give workshops on what they do, and they are not often asked to give a plenary presentation at healthcare mission conferences. Conference organizers ask me how they can get more nurses to come to the conferences. After all, we need many more nurses in healthcare missions. Then I ask them, "When was the last time you had a nurse give a plenary address? How many workshops are geared toward nurses?"

There are issues related to nursing in healthcare missions that need to be addressed. It is my responsibility as Missions Director for NCF to advocate that missionary nursing be included and that nurses have a place around the missions table.

While nursing is a highly respected profession, it is also commonly misunderstood by society and the healthcare system. Nurses are people whom God has called to care for the sick, injured and dying. Nursing has its roots in the diaconal movement of the church. We are servants at heart, caring for people created in God's image at some of the most vulnerable times in their lives. We are not perfect, we make mistakes, and we are dependent on God. But Christian nurses consider it an honor to represent Jesus to those who need our care.



[Grace Tazelaar](#) is a veteran missionary nurse who offers wisdom from years of experience serving God cross-culturally. Find more resources, best practices, and what you need to know about missionary nursing at [NCF Missions](#).