Sarah Mullally on the rationale for going down this path

Rediscovers a Ministry of Health: Parish nursing as a mission of the local church
Helen Anne Wordsworth
Wpf & Stock £16
(978-1-4982-0595-5)

I SHOULD declare an interest in this book and topic. During my time as Chief Nursing Officer, under a previous government, I met Helen Wordsworth as she set out to explore parish nursing in the UK. I was struck by the challenge that lay in front of her: to gain support not only within the Church, but also within the National Health Service, would require her to gain the confidence both healthcare professionals and people in church leadership.

A year later, this book demonstrates what Wordsworth understands what it takes to introduce a new initiative. The book seeks to provide a theological rationale and demonstrate the practical worth of parish nursing to the mission of the Church.

Parish nursing ministry commenced in the UK in November 2003, and it involves the appointment of a registered nurse as part of the church ministry team’s developing a whole-person health programme with both congregation and community.

The book covers theological literature on the mission of the local church and of parish nursing in the United States. It describes the qualitative study of 15 churches that have parish nurses and a control group of similar parishes. I was struck by the findings, which suggested that the mission of the Church was enhanced by parish

nursing in three main ways. There was increased contact with non-churchgoers; volunteering by the church around the health initiative increased; and the range of missional activities undertaken was breadthened, not just in the realm of physical health, but across the board, in mental-health, community-health, and spiritual-health interventions. It also required church leaders to engage with other voluntary and statutory bodies.

The book demonstrates the opportunities that are there if the Church rediscovers a ministry of wholeness, and parish nurses offer a way to do that. Parish nursing enables the Church to meet those who are not churchgoers. It is about building relationships, and building the Kingdom of God.

The book reports the evidence that the NHS demands and that the Church should listen to. Parish nursing is not a simple way for churches to re-engage with health ministry. Parish Nursing Ministry UK has, however, done much of the hard work.

Wordsworth’s vision of having at least one parish nurse alongside, and as a complement to, health care in God’s name, is a district achievable because of the sustainable support structure that has been put in place by Parish Nursing UK.

I would recommend this book to church leaders seeking to engage with their non-church community, as well as to nurses who have heard God’s call on their lives, and to those in the NHS who are seeking to engage with the wider sector.

As Wordsworth suggests, parish nursing not only offers a way of engaging in the work of God, but helps to build a society that allows people to pursue purpose for living, that offers choice, and that makes it possible for lives to be transformed.

The Rt Rev Sarah Mullally is the Bishop of Crediton.

Making the last great journey

David Bryant finds a hospice chaplain’s reflections supportive

Voices from the Hospice: Staying with life through suffering and waiting
Bob Whorton
SCM Press £16.99
(978-0-334-05426-9)
CT Bookshop special price £14.45

BOB WHORTON has written this book from nine years of experience as a hospice chaplain. He views life as a train journey in which the stations represent the different phases that we pass through on the way to death.

He describes the voyage unfolds like a tapestry, interweaving his own insights in with those of the hospice patients and their friends and families. These reflections are interspersed with comments on some extracts from the Psalms which often duplicate the worries and concerns of the dying and their carers. His pastoral sensitivity and compassion shine out from the pages of the book. He shows with great humanity how the experi­ences of pain, fear, and drug-taking are not all loss, but are stages on life’s path which can bring us close to God.

He seizes approaching death as a space where something new can grow, a dimension of life through which we can mature spiritually. This throws a new and imaginative light on time spent in the hospice, turning it into a pilgrimage. There is a lucidity and gentleness in his writing. This book will be helpful to nurses and lay people visiting the terminally ill, and will bring con­solidation and fresh hope to those embarking on the last great journey.

Whorton is not afraid to confront atheism, and he puts forward an existentialist view of life which is refreshingly and relevant. He speaks of the myth of the soul, and with great openness shows how it is often necessary for our old images of God to be broken before we can find him in his fullness. This is a cour­ageous theology to put forward. I guess many readers will thank him for it and find their own spiritual living opened.

The whole thrust of the book is positive. Time and again, the author sees life and death as a way of seedbed from which new life can spring. Ultimately, peace comes when we let go and allow God to begin his work of restoration and to bring about peace and wholeness.

I particularly liked chapter nine, “The Breaking of God”. We have to be prepared to “stare into the dark­ness of a random world in which we have to create our own meaning”. Only when we are ready to be seedbed of God can we discover him afresh. What we are discovering is overwhelming.

Whorton not only shows us how to find “the courage to be” when facing death: he recreates a vision of God as co-suffering and compas­sionate. Facing terminal cancer, I found this book to be full of com­fort, hope, prayerfulness, and a profound love of God. Thank you, Bob Whorton.

The Rev David Bryant is a retired priest living in Yorkshire.

Motivated by Christ’s love

Ted Harrison on a story of holistic care

Receiving her MBE: Pat Pilkington with her husband, Christopher, in a photo from the book

Tiley told them about a vivid experience that he had had as a boy when he had “died” and visited heaven, only to return to earth with the gift of healing. The book is filled with anecdotes of the extraordinary, of people who see angels, of those who have predicted their deaths, to processions of the saints, out-of-body sensations, and moving deathbed scenes.

The spiritual journey that the author describes, in a book written shortly before her death, tells of her reconciliation of Christian teaching and Anglican tradition with New Age ideas. She sees no contradiction in her understanding of the love of Christ with much New Age mysticism.

She is open-minded about notions of the afterlife which have echoes of Spirituality. She cites Gnosticism and quotes from the Gospel of Thomas. She blames St Paul for turning the Jesus that brought the good news of tran­scendence through divine love into the figure of judgement at the heart of a theology of sin, guilt, and dam­nation.

Her personal shedding of Chris­tian orthodoxy to discover a new depth to her Christian life is one side of the story. The other side concerns the practical struggle that she, Penny Brohn, and their team faced to realise their vision, of pioneering new ways to help those with diagnosed cancer. Pilkington describes both the successes and the setbacks on the way. The most serious was the publication of a medical report, damming their results, which received huge pub­licity. The later apologies for meth­odological flaws and retractions received far less media interest.

Today, the centre that Pilkington helped to found has long since recovered its reputation, has largely overcome the suspicions of the medical establishment, and is a world leader in its field.

Ted Harrison is a former BBC religious-affairs correspondent.

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Evocative: this photo of footsteps in sand by Joe Drivas is one of the Getty images used in Strength for the Journey by Helen J. Bate.

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