

THE JOYFUL MINISTRY OF NURSING

By Dr. Jim Fuller and Dr. Rebecca Blair '80



Pauline Vermillion

Sensitive to the deep needs of others and gifted with the art of healing, the little girl knew her life's vocation when she was only four years old. And Pauline Vermillion went on to fulfill her childhood dream in a career of nursing. Born and raised in a Christian family, her faith commitment formed the solid foundation for her service to others. For Vermillion, nursing has been more than a job—more than a career of service—it has been her ministry. When in active service, she preferred to work in a holistic way, caring for the soul and emotional well-being of the patient and patient's family as well as providing health care for the physical body. Her experience has prompted her to define nursing essentially as a reciprocal relationship between the health care provider and the patient. In her work, she found that her patients gave her so much in return even as she gave what she could to them. For her, nursing amounts to a life's work that “helps bring joy,” to both the patient and the nurse.



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Born in 1939 in Illinois, she was the middle daughter of three children. Her parents, Paul and Frances Milhouse, both graduated of Indiana Central College. In fact, the church and college connections ran deep in the Milhouse family as her father, a minister in the Evangelical United Brethren and United Methodist Churches, went on to lengthy and distinguished service as a bishop. Vermillion proudly points to her parents as mentors. When she was eight years old, she decided that she wanted to be baptized as an outward symbol of her dedication to Christ. She remembers that she “suggested this to Dad,” and he arranged an interview for her in his study. She dutifully dressed up in nice clothes and went in for her appointment with her father, her minister. He discussed baptism with her and agreed that she was ready and, from that time forward, Pauline has lived an active Christian life.

But her vocational calling had come even earlier than her baptism. When she was only four years old, she spent a lot of time with several members of the church who worked as nurses, including one lady who served a church camp nurse. Following the nurse about, the young girl was drawn to medicine and caring for others, soon affirming that she wanted to be a nurse herself. In her family, service to others was expected

as a basic part of life, so Vermillion knew that she would eventually find her calling to full-time Christian service of some kind. Her parents encouraged and supported her in her desire to be a nurse, and she viewed the profession as “a way to express my faith.”

There was never any question in her household about where she would go to college. The Milhouse family, staunch members of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, sent nearly every member of three generations to Indiana Central College. Though her parents urged their children to attend the family alma mater, Vermillion considered other colleges as well since the family was living in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania at the time she graduated from high school, and Vermillion felt unsure about attending college far away from home. But, in the end, ICC won out, since she was a Milhouse and, to them, Indiana Central was “the ONLY college!” So, she came to Indianapolis in 1957 to enroll in the nursing program.

She remembers her time at Indiana Central fondly, especially the camaraderie with other students. “It was different than today,” she says, noting that that there was not as much transportation available, which meant that “most students stayed on campus” and there were lots of weekend activities. These offerings included involvement with the University Heights Church as well as on-campus activities. In addition to students, several faculty members stand out

in her memory for their personal dedication to students as well as their academic talents, including Dr. Sybil Weaver in English, Dr. Robert McBride in Philosophy, and Dr. William P. Morgan in Biology.

In her sophomore year, the college set up a new two-year associate’s degree program in nursing, and she switched into it, graduating as a member of the first class to complete that program. While the two-year nursing program would become quite popular later on, many at the time viewed the thoroughness with which it could prepare nurses skeptically, which made it rather difficult in her early career. Traditionally, nursing students served many long hours in hospitals, which utilized their services to supplement their staff. The two-year program concentrated on nursing education rather than internships, and some hospital administrators resented losing a pool of free laborers.

After graduating from nursing school in 1961, she worked at St. Francis Hospital in Indianapolis until she passed the state board. She might have stayed in Indiana or gone back to Pennsylvania, but soon another opportunity arose. Dr. Roy Turley, an ICC graduate, had become the superintendent of the Espanola Hospital in New Mexico. Always keen to invite talented ICC students



and alums to share their talents in the mission hospital, he invited Vermillion to come there to work. No stranger to Espanola, she had visited when she was in the fifth grade and had interned there the summer of the sophomore year at ICC, loving the experience. She quickly accepted the offer and moved west.

Vermillion remained in New Mexico for three years, working as the hospital's health extension nurse, which meant that she visited the mountain villages to provide in-home health care. The hospital served an impoverished, diverse community and, Vermillion recalls that she "learned so much." The experience immersed her in the kind of nursing she came to love throughout her career: a holistic, personal approach that involved developing a trusting relationship with patients and their families in hopes of providing spiritual and emotional support as well as medical care. The hospital also "sent me to school one summer at Indiana University to learn about Public Health Nursing," a valuable part of her education that would continue to prove useful later in her career.

In 1964, Vermillion returned to Indiana Central to join the faculty at the invitation of President Esch. She was responsible

for maternity nursing education and worked closely with Kathleen Drake, another faculty member. In order to teach at the college, she was required to obtain a Master's degree, which she earned at Indiana University. Her return to Indianapolis also brought romance, as she soon met Art Vermillion, an ordained minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). They were married in May of 1966, just after they both completed their Master's degrees. About two years later, Art accepted an offer to serve as an Associate Pastor at a church in New Mexico, so Vermillion moved west again. When they started a family, she concentrated on raising children. Although she did not work full-time as a nurse, she engaged in lots of volunteer work, including clinical supervision. When her children reached school age, she "volunteered as a school nurse one day a week for four years and taught a health education program for all grades." This volunteer work enabled her to remain professionally active as well as be involved with her children's education.

After ten years of part-time, volunteer service, she went back to full-time nursing in 1980 at the University of New Mexico Hospital. She worked the night shift on a post-surgical unit so that she would be home when the children returned from school in the afternoons. In addition to working and keeping the household together, she was



heavily involved in her children's school and 4-H activities, along with the family's work in the church. In 1983, she returned to school nursing, but she did not like the uncertainty of the situation, as it was never clear whether the budget would allow the school to rehire her the next year. So, with her children now heading off to college, she made another move in 1984, this time to Public Health Nursing.

For six years, she worked for the Public Health Department, making home visits, helping to set up a drug awareness program, and working in community clinics. After six years, the family moved to St. Louis, where she continued to work in public health. Two years later, in 1992, they moved back to Indianapolis to be close to her parents who had retired and were living in Franklin. She found a position as the community health nurse at the Robin Run Retirement Village.

In these positions, she worked as the kind of nurse she had always hoped to be, developing relationships with her patients and their families, reaching out to them on the emotional and spiritual levels as well as offering medical care. This kind of dedicated nursing meant that she would be available to them, since her presence sometimes was what they needed most. At other times, she joined them in prayer or offered words of encouragement, gently witnessing for Christ



in her work. She remembers her efforts in community and public health nursing as “helping to bring joy,” for herself as well as her patients. She says that “it is incredible how much people give you,” and she felt like she did the most good and brought the most joy when she was “helping people get through a rough time.” In particular, Vermillion has thrived on helping others understand a given medical situation, providing essential information and support and assisting patients in asking the right questions, a necessary element in the medical treatment process. In those work situations in which “people’s needs weren’t the ultimate focus,” in which a particular hospital or program emphasized the budget and profits more than helping people, Vermillion felt disappointed most greatly. Fortunately, Vermillion observes that she fortunately found herself working in more positive situations most of the time.

Still, her work life brought time of doubt. At age forty, she realized the disparity between her youthful dreams for her life and the practical realities of life as a wife, mother and nurse. Though she understood her quandary to be a common midlife experi-

ence, Vermillion worried whether she had done the right things with her life. But she soon set her doubts aside, trusting in God, and knowing that “you still have to be who you are,” no matter what doubts you may entertain. For the most part, however, she has felt happy with her vocational choices, drawing strength from the joy of faith, family, and work. In a way, she finds that her service in community nursing has been “just an extension of myself.” As she affirms, “I don’t think I can do anything without giving.” And since “service is all about giving to others,” she has found that her work genuinely embodies who she is, an essential ingredient to true happiness.

In 1995, after three years serving at the retirement community, she made another move, this time to a completely different field. She accepted a position as Coordinator for Christian Education at Speedway Christian Church, holding this job ever since. As a student at Indiana Central, the only other profession she had ever considered besides nursing was Christian education. Nearly forty years after her graduation from college, she finally has found an opportunity to do Christian education full time, commenting that “now I’ve had the opportunity to do both of my favorite things in my lifetime.” While she had done some teaching in the

nursing field, this new job required very different teaching skills from her earlier efforts. It grew out of her service in the church, where she had started a ministry for widows and widowers as well as service activities like “Parents Day Out,” which offered daycare for mothers in the congregation who needed time to run errands or just relax. She also began a “Worship & Wonder” program for children in Sunday School.

Starting such programs was nothing new for Vermillion, since she has always been “aware of needs,” using her skills as an organizer to provide what is necessary. Always active, she thrives on making ideas work in reality, traits that help greatly in her role as education coordinator at the church. While she had found teaching nursing a difficult task because she missed the one-on-one connection with patients, she has found Christian education a rewarding field of endeavor. She works with people who are excited about their faith and tries to build on that to inspire a sense of “worship and wonder.” Clearly, her role as an educator is another ministry of joy.

For Pauline Vermillion, her vocational work has been both the fulfillment of her Christian call to service and a part of her own identity as a person. She is proud of Indiana Central and excited about programs like the Parish Nursing Program, which seeks to train nurses to practice the kind of nursing that Vermillion herself practiced by treating the whole person, including the spiritual side. Called to her career as a young child, she has found in nursing a lifetime of work in which her personality, passion, and skills combined meaningfully to help others. She encourages today’s students to “be willing to be who you are to make a difference to others. Don’t be afraid to give of yourself. Be willing to live into what you do.” Such passion has paid off in her own experience, and she believes that it is essential to those who seek happiness: “You won’t be fulfilled unless you’re willing to give of who you are.” Such fulfillment has abounded for Pauline Vermillion in the joyful ministry of nursing.

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2. Hospital (from a distance) at Espanola where Pauline Vermillion served (1962) – personal photo used by permission of Pauline Vermillion.
3. Pauline Vermillion (color portrait from late 1990s); personal photo used by permission of Pauline Vermillion.
4. Photo of “Verla & me” (July 1963); personal photograph/slide used by permission of Pauline Vermillion.
5. Photo of Pauline Vermillion at the time of her 1961 graduation from Nursing School; personal photo used by permission of Pauline Vermillion.
6. Chapel on campus of McCurdy School where Pauline Vermillion served (1962); personal photo used by permission of Pauline Vermillion.