

THE SERVICE OF NURSING MINISTRY

By Michael G. Cartwright & Rebecca Blair '80



Cheryl Catlin Larson '66 '71

As the daughter of an Evangelical United Brethren pastor, Cheryl Larson grew up in a welcoming home in which care and hospitality were frequently provided for missionaries. Indeed, Larson, impressed by their sense of dedication to calling, seriously considered the prospect of serving as a missionary through the United Methodist Church, the descendent of the EUB denomination. In the summer of 1972, Larson traveled to Zaire, working for two months as a short-term replacement for a nurse on leave for the summer. One year before this experience, L. Cheryl Catlin Larson had received her bachelor of science degree in nursing from Indiana Central College, completing an educational journey which had

commenced in 1964 when she matriculated to the institution to study for the associate of science degree in nursing, graduating in 1966. Animated by the deep desire to care for the essential needs of fellow human beings, Larson discerned the particular nature of her vocational calling while in Zaire. She learned that, while she was not called to missionary service, her talents and caring heart fitted her well for teaching and ministry in the nursing profession.

Particularly in the period from the 1970s to the present, Indiana Central College, now the University of Indianapolis, earned a reputation for the superior quality of its educational and experiential programs in nursing, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and related healthcare professions. As these programs developed, intensive short-term certification and continuing education initiatives enriched their range and quality. The parish nursing program, one exemplar of these program initiatives, owes its existence, quality, and longevity to the efforts of Cheryl Larson. A forerunner of civic and community engagement curricula, the parish nursing program intentionally offers collaboration with community partners in churches, hospitals, and other such community institutions. In return, these community organizations agree to provide tuition, books, and other necessary materials for nurses who serve in these contexts to learn more about the importance of hospitality, the roles of communities and congregations, the theological significance of healing, health, and wholeness, and the practical dimensions of parish nursing.

Larson herself discerned her particular calling in the context of teaching and serving for four years as the parish nurse at the Honey Creek United Methodist Church in Greenwood, Indiana. Her experience in this congregation infused Larson with a passion for parish nursing. After joining the faculty of the University of Indianapolis in 1994, her interest in teaching parish nursing and health ministries merged, and in 1996, Larson proposed that the University of

Indianapolis develop a program specifically to train parish nurses through the School of Nursing. This program was initiated in 1996–1997. In Larson's conception, the program would embody the values embedded in the University's motto, "Education for Service," as well as those consonant with the United Methodist denomination's mission.

Students who seek to enroll in the parish nursing program must be registered nurses, have completed three years of experience in the nursing profession, and possess spiritual engagement and maturity. Over the course of six intensive sessions, these individuals study and reflect upon the facets of nursing conjoined with the issues of congregational care. The International Parish Nursing Resource Center affirms that courses prepare parish nurses to perform seven essential functions within the congregation: integrator of faith and health issues, health educator, personal health counselor, health referral agent, trainer of health care volunteers, developer of health support groups, and congregational health advocate.¹ Flexibility exists within the conception of the parish nurse role for individuals to assume formal offices of ministry, such as deacon or deaconess, eucharistic or diaconal minister, or other lay ministry roles, in conjunction with parish nursing.

It is this integrative character of parish nursing that forms its central feature, despite the range of particular job descriptions apparent across congregations and denominations. In fact, it is precisely this integration of nursing and ministry that frequently leads to a transformative understanding of vocation and identity for each parish nurse. As a part of the commissioning ceremonies, each parish nurse is invited to offer his or her own statement in which to articulate a renewed understanding of identity in relation to parish nursing ministry as a calling. Following



B



the commitment statements, candidates are anointed with the sign of the cross in oil on their foreheads along with the words, “I commission you to a ministry of healing and wholeness, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” This ancient practice of anointing marks the affirmation of the vocational task informed by the educational process, an overt recognition of the ethic of education for service.

From the inception of the program in 1996 to the present, more than two-hundred fifty individuals, most of them women, have completed the UIndy parish nurse course to enact their vocational callings within congregations. In fact, six are nurses who are currently—or who have been at an earlier point in their lives—members of the University of Indianapolis nursing faculty: Judy Bryan, Karen Hirsch, Margie Porter, Leslie Oleck, Lou Ellen Sears, and Ann Stahl. For each of these women, infected by the vision, enthusiasm and passion of their colleague, Cheryl Larson, the ministerial aspect of parish nursing completes a vocation dedicated to teaching and caring for others. Indeed, when Lou Ellen Sears retired in 2001, she continued her educational service as a parish nurse at the Southport United Methodist Church on the southside of Indianapolis.

Approximately twenty-five percent of the persons who have been commissioned to date hold United Methodist affiliation, while fifteen percent serve within the Roman Catholic Church. The remaining sixty percent are spread among Lutheran, Presbyterian, Baptist, Disciples of Christ and United Church of Christ congregations. Indeed, though Christian congregations make up the majority of parish nursing settings, Rabbi Geoffrey Dennis of Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation, the Reformed Jewish Synagogue in Indianapolis, pronounced a special *berakah* or blessing for Patricia Calderon in December 1998 as she took up the task of parish ministry to this congregation, demonstrating the ecumenical and interfaith dimension of this initiative.



Thanks to the dedicated and persistent leadership of Cheryl Catlin Larson to her vocational calling and her alma mater, the Parish Nursing Program has thrived over the years. As a part of this growth, Larson has incorporated curricular revisions and partnership programs within the School of Nursing to facilitate student nurse reflection on the vocational development of parish nurses in the congregational context of their particular ministries. She currently coordinates the Parish Nursing Vocational Initiative of the Crossings Project, a vocational discernment program at the University of Indianapolis funded by the Religion Division of the Lilly Endowment. In addition, Cheryl Larson has sought further community connections, working with parish nursing coordinators and their institutions across the state to bring her vision of an “Indiana Center for Parish Nursing” to fruition. Recently, Clarian Health Partners donated office space for the center which is located at 1815 N. Capitol in Indianapolis. The collaborative model of nursing within parish settings extends the possibilities for the enactment of education for service within the community. As parish nurse Jeanne Brownlee observed in her Statement of Commitment:

“God gives to each of us a mission in life. Once we start living our lives with that conviction, we soon know what we are sent to doThe image of cupped hands is important to me. It symbolizes our ability to hold what is offered to us as a gift, or to open our hands to give to others. As I begin this new mission as a parish nurse, I am aware that the power of our hands also involves healing and being healed, as well as giving and receiving.”²

As she retires in 2006, Cheryl Larson can positively reflect upon the lasting, meaningful ministries made possible through her leadership in the parish nursing program, the embodiment of her willing and passionate assumption of a teaching vocation rooted in service.

— *Lantz Center Medallion for Christian Service 2006*



F



G

INDEX OF PHOTOGRAPHS: IDENTIFICATIONS & PERMISSIONS

Cheryl Catlin Larson '66 '71

- A (p. 110) Cheryl Catlin Larson, R. N. caring for patient in the hospital (ca. 1966). Personal photo used with permission of Cheryl Larson.
- B (p. 111) Cheryl Larson—"Pinning photo" upon completion of the Indiana Central College Nursing program (1966). Personal photo used with permission of Cheryl Larson.
- C (p. 112) Becca Cartledge—Speaker also member of Class #10 Parish Nursing Class Day 1 (2004) Personal photo used with permission of Cheryl Larson.
- D (p. 112) Cheryl Catlin Larson and her husband Les. Personal photograph used with permission of Cheryl Larson.
- E (p. 112) Parish Nursing students Winnie Dotson and Susan Womble. Personal photo used with permission of Cheryl Larson.
- F (p. 113) Cheryl Larson with Parish Nursing Class #18 in front of UIndy's seal. Personal photo used with permission of Cheryl Larson.
- G (p. 113) Parish Nursing Class #16. Personal photo used with permission of Cheryl Larson.