

Moving Forward with Faith

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During my 25 years as a Faith Community Nurse, I have observed the connection between health and spirituality and especially appreciate the focus on behavioral health.

In 2024 the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (ODMHSAS) launched the Moving Forward with Faith initiative (<https://oklahoma.gov/odmhsas/prevention/faith-organizations.html>). This initiative, funded through a grant with monies from the Opioid Settlement, has a goal to have a mental health ministry in every church in Oklahoma. With these funds the state has partnered with Faith Partners (www.faithpartners.org) a 501c3 program to provide the structure of this ministry and the training of the teams.

Why? Data from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in 2022, states that suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in Oklahoma, and the second leading cause of death for ages 10 – 34. According to the ODMHSAS, in 2023 sixty-six percent of Oklahoma communities did not have enough mental health providers to serve residents per federal guidelines. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) through the Center for Faith Based and Neighborhood Partnerships (The Partnership Center) as well as the

ODMHSAS have recognized that Churches are places that hold the community's trust and thus are great places to provide accurate and up-to-date health information and community resources. In Oklahoma we know that almost every town has a church, and some are blessed to have a Faith Community Nurse in their congregation as well as other healthcare providers. Faith communities also recognize the importance of body-mind and spirit in the physical and spiritual health of their congregants.

In rural Oklahoma, churches play a significant role in the life of their communities. Churches can also play a vital role in breaking the stigma of mental illness, supporting congregants experiencing mental challenges, and providing accurate health information to their members.

The Moving Forward with Faith initiative is free to the congregation, it provides training and guidance to set up a ministry that is unique to each church and compliments the values and beliefs of the church. There is no obligation or contract to sign. For the training, the church sends a team of 3-4 congregants to attend a 2-day course that provides the tools/resources to start this ministry. Through networking and training opportunities, sup-

port is available to the teams. The program does not provide counseling but can provide referrals as indicated.

As an example, our Church of St. Benedict in Broken Arrow, OK has recently partnered with the Moving Forward with Faith initiative to start the St. Dymphna Mental Health Ministry. We started with a congregational survey, conducted through Faith Partners, which showed the desire for education and information on community resources. This past October we began an 8-session program on mental health entitled Sanctuary Course – available in both an Ecumenical and Catholic version (www.sanctuarymentalhealth.org). We also formed a monthly prayer group. The team is currently networking with resources in the community, creating an informational brochure for the congregation, and hosting the QPR Suicide Prevention Program (see <https://qprinstitute.com>). We recently started the Sanctuary Course for Youth with our high school youth group.

For more information on Moving Forward with Faith, contact Stephanie Montes (Field Representative/Prevention Services, ODMHSAS Central office, Oklahoma City) at stephanie.montes@odmhsas.org. As a member of the State Advisory Council for Moving Forward with Faith, I encourage you to spread the word about this important program for the health of Oklahoma.

Faith Community Nurses are also known as Parish Nurses and Church Nurses. Helping our congregations with mental health and grief and assisting our church leaders with these challenges are just a few of the many ways we can help society. Although many of us engage in these activities on a voluntary basis, the work is highly rewarding. For other ways to bring health to our communities, please see our website <https://www.fcnaok.org> and the FCNA-OK Facebook page. ■