

**We are  
Called**

TO HEAL. TO UNITE. TO JUSTICE.



## Team Reflection

### No. 16 – Long-Term Care Workers

When interviewed by a journalist, Edwina Gobewoe, a CNA veteran in a nursing home for nearly 20 years, said she and a friend started each workday with a prayer, asking for strength to care for people they knew needed them so much. Another worker, Kim Sangrey, described the stress of caring for residents amidst the COVID-19 outbreaks: “You’d go into residents’ rooms and they couldn’t breathe. Their families wanted to see them, and we’d set up Zoom wearing full gear, head to toe. Tears are flowing under your mask as you watch this person that you loved dying – and the family mourning their death through a tablet. It was completely devastating.” [16.1]

Those difficulties stay with them. Some long-term care (LTC) workers stay awake at night struggling to detach from the memories of their shifts. Holistic support for their well-being is in high demand as the pandemic has taken a heavy toll. The toll on LTC workers includes skilled nursing and assisted living facilities, as well as home health workers. Individuals in these roles are included in the disproportionately large number of coronavirus-related deaths occurring in LTC facilities.

As caregivers in their work, more than 60% of LTC workers also care for at least one other outside of work, often at home such as a child or an older adult. They commonly hold second jobs. [16.2] The vast majority are female (82%), more than a quarter Black, and among personal care workers, almost half are Black or Hispanic (32% and 16% respectively). Where Black workers represent 13% of all jobs across the U.S. economy, they fill 35% of nursing assistants positions, with a mean hourly wage of \$14.22. [16.3]

The coronavirus opened wide particular challenges for long-term care facilities. Beyond the challenge of curtailing the spread of infectious disease, these ministries witness a unique balance of both labor justice and justice for the elderly and seriously ill. These two distinct populations – a lower-paid workforce overwhelmingly comprised of women and the elderly – both experience aspects of vulnerability and mutually rely on one another.

Pay and protections for workers in LTC facilities reflects a care and concern for the workers themselves, as well as for the residents and senior populations. Some may unintentionally overlook LTC workers as their work environment lacks the glitz of

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cutting- edge technologies and the shiny edifices of medical centers. Their work entails the ordinary routine of daily living — folding, cleaning, bathing and toileting. In many of the world’s spiritual traditions, the sacred resides in the ordinary. In the Christian calendar, many months of the years bear the label “ordinary time,” where God’s divine life in Jesus is experienced in daily living. Despite the label, it is no less holy.

Spiritual writer and poet Kathleen Norris reflects on the sacredness of everyday life. She observes how the distressed prophet Jeremiah, in the Hebrew scriptures, hits a turning point when he remembers the good and steadfast love of God’s care for him. God’s care for Jeremiah is like daily bread and care that God offers to us. Norris writes, “we also need the daily love of other people to reassure us that our lives have value.” [16.4]

Daily, LTC workers extend countless gestures of loving care to residents. The leaders of health systems and individual LTC facilities have responsibility for the structures within these facilities such as just wages and the provision of workplace protections. In addition, leaders shape the culture that recognizes the sacredness of the care enacted by workers. Leaders are called to honor and show loving care, appreciation and gratitude for the individual workers enacting the caring alongside and for the residents.

## Consider

- What are my own assumptions about caregivers in LTC facilities?
- In what ways might their work be seen as sacred?
- If I am a caregiver to another, what can I do today strengthen my own sense of the inherent goodness in the care I offer?
- What do I learn about caring and love from my own experiences of daily care for others, whether a baby, child, or elder?

## Let us pray together,

Kathleen Norris wrote this poem named after a meal program where she volunteered offering warm food to the elderly in her town:

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## **“Nutrition Site”**

*We are off-site now,  
in the van delivering  
hot meals  
in a fierce winter.  
One widow’s house  
smells of stale water.  
Ancient linoleum peels  
and buckles  
on the wounded  
hardwood floor.*

*Her Valentine roses  
have lost their bloom;  
wrinkled, they droop  
on their stems,  
as if weighted  
by beauty.*

*Their beauty. Yes.  
Like the widow’s icy walk,  
her gnarled hand  
on the lap  
robe, in the musty  
living room, her Bible  
open to Isaiah 35:  
“and the desert shall rejoice,  
and blossom as the rose,”*

*her wrinkly smile  
as I knock and  
enter. Beauty, yes. All of it.  
And truth.*

Kathleen Norris, *The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy and “Women’s Work,”* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 87-88.

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[16.1] <https://khn.org/news/long-term-care-workers-grieving-and-under-siege-brace-for-covids-next-round/>

[16.2] Van Houtven CH, DePasquale N, Coe NB. Essential Long-Term Care Workers Commonly Hold Second Jobs and Double- or Triple-Duty Caregiving Roles. *J Am Geriatr Soc.* 2020;68(8):1657-1660. doi:10.1111/jgs.16509

[16.2] <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/covid-19-and-workers-at-risk-examining-the-long-term-care-workforce/>

[16.3] <https://www.brookings.edu/research/black-essential-workers-lives-matter-they-deserve-real-change-not-just-lip-service/>

[16.4] Kathleen Norris, *The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy and “Women’s Work,”* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 68.