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By Scott Collins

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A generation ago, churches stood at the center of nearly every Texas town, and religious faith permeated the communities. That spirit still lives at the five retirement communities operated across Texas by Buckner Retirement Services.

Buckner retirement residents “grew up when the church was literally the center of town,” explained Kenneth Harpster, chaplain at Buckner Villas in Austin. “There may have been one or two different churches—the Methodist, the Baptist or whatever. Sometimes the different denominations shared buildings, so if you joined on the Methodist Sunday, you became a Methodist, and the same goes for Baptist or whatever.

“Most all activity of the town revolved around the life of the church, so that is a very familiar part of the lives of many of the retired,” he added. “There are many good memories from those days.”

Senior adults who were raised in a time of faith and family still possess a strong faith that cannot be separated from who they are, according to

Harpster and other Buckner chaplains. That's one reason Buckner chaplains and retirement community directors integrate faith throughout their communities.

“The faith piece is just kind of woven among almost everything we do,” said Ron Warner, executive director of Buckner Westminster Place in Longview. “It's not that we have a chaplain over here and we have chapel services over here, but it's woven into who we are It is part of everything we do.”

The same philosophy guides Craig Garrett, chaplain at Calder Woods in Beaumont.

“I am a firm believer that you can't segment a person's life,” Garrett said. “You can't ... say we are only going to care for a certain part of a person's life. Health is something that encompasses more than one area.”

“As people get to know us, or they get to learn about our campus, there are some things that they readily pick up,” explained Mary Alexander, executive director of Calder Woods. “They pick up that we are built on a Christian foundation. When they hear that we have a chaplaincy program, they learn that we care about all people, not just Baptists. We care about people from all walks of life.”

Glenn Shoemake, executive director of Buckner Retirement Village in Dallas and the campus chaplain, agreed that faith weaves his community together.

“For me, part of what makes this a community is that by and large, our residents have devoted a significant part of their life to spiritual values as well as other values. When they came to the village, they were looking for an environment in which that spiritual part of their lives was still something that was valued and supported.”

Buckner chaplains work daily to meet the spiritual needs of community residents.

“My role is to comfort, to be that representative of God people may be looking for,” Harpster said. “I see that the particular faith needs of the residents are met. I attempt to make sure they have someone from their faith tradition to come see them and offer whatever is appropriate for them in their tradition.”

One of the most important roles he plays, Harpster said, is in the “ministry of presence,” to be a “representative of God in their lives.”

A major part of a chaplain's ministry with senior adults focuses on building relationships, said □Rick Webb, chaplain at Buckner Westminster Place in Longview. “Aging is a process of changing relationships because relationships are lost.”

And while Buckner chaplains provide ministry to community residents, they also offer residents opportunities to minister to others. Residents often pray for each other and the Buckner staff during weekly prayer meetings and Bible studies. And they minister to other residents who are sick or have lost a family member.

The senior adults at Calder Woods prove that people continually grow spiritually, Garrett said.

“I have people come to Sunday School and almost every time, somebody will say: 'You know, I never thought of it that way before. I never heard that before.' That kind of floors me sometimes because these are men and women who have grown up in their churches. But often they teach me things. I have to be on my toes.”