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By Craig Bird

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FORT WORTH (ABP)-If military and prison chaplains serve in "pastoral roles," then so do chaplains in hospitals, hospices and nursing homes. So say a number of medical chaplains and the professional organizations that oversee their work.

There are parallels between the homesick soldier in Iraq who turns to her chaplain for spiritual answers and the unchurched patient in the cardiac-care unit who asks to see the hospital chaplain because she can't sleep, the chaplains say.

Likewise, the Death Row inmate who wants help in praying for his salvation so he can be baptized is much the same, the chaplains say, as the nursing home resident who has outlived all the pastors he has ever known and who asks his chaplain to let him take the Lord's Supper one last time.

And like military and prison chaplains, their counterparts in the medical

world are expected to minister to spiritual needs all along the spectrum of belief systems-not just those of the chaplains' theological and denominational preference.

"I am the only pastor many of these children and their families ever know," said Ann Miller, director of chaplains at Cook Children's Medical Center in Fort Worth, and a member of Broadway Baptist Church. "I bury more children in a year than most traditional pastors do in a lifetime."

But that understanding is at odds with the position recently taken by the North American Mission Board, the chaplain-endorsing agency for the Southern Baptist Convention, which is opposed to women serving in pastoral roles. NAMB said in February it will no longer endorse female chaplains for military or prison settings but will endorse female chaplains for medical settings because their function is not pastoral.

The NAMB trustees were responding to a motion at the SBC's annual meeting last June asking them to reconsider their 2002 decision to stop endorsing ordained women in any area of chaplaincy, while still endorsing women in all categories who are not ordained.

The motion was spearheaded by Southern Baptist military chaplains who argued that endorsing female military chaplains who are not ordained would seriously undermine the spiritual effectiveness of all ordained military chaplains. So NAMB trustees voted last month to cease endorsement of any females to chaplaincy positions "where the role and function of the chaplain would be seen the same as that of a pastor."

According to NAMB, soldiers and prisoners look to their chaplains for counseling, weddings, funerals, preaching and baptism, but hospital chaplains are not called to perform many of those "pastoral duties."

Terry Fox, NAMB trustee chairman, said since hospital chaplains are not expected to perform pastoral duties, particularly those involving the Lord's

Supper and baptism, “We are happy with women being hospital chaplains.”

The rationale rests heavily on the fact that local, ordained and male pastors are just a phone call away from any hospital, hospice or nursing home in America, while the same is not true for military personnel and prisoners.

Indeed, according to the ethical standards for medical chaplains, the first option is to call in the patient's minister of choice. But what happens, they ask, when the patient has no connection to a local church or, because of an emergency situation, the local pastor is not available?

According to a 2002 study conducted by the five largest professional chaplain associations in North America, 58 percent of patients surveyed could not name “a spiritual counselor with whom they could identify.” And a significant number of patients who do indeed have pastors choose not to inform them of their medical situation, the study noted.

The same study, called “Professional Chaplaincy,” listed the job requirements of medical chaplains as designing and leading religious ceremonies of worship and ritual such as prayer, meditation and reading of holy texts; worship and observance of holy days; blessings and sacraments; memorial services and funerals; rituals at the time of birth or other significant times of life cycle transition; and holiday observances.

NAMB's own website calls hospital chaplains pastors. “They are ministers called by God and trained to serve in an environment of sickness, pain, birth, death and continuous learning experiences,” the website says. “They function as pastor, prophet, teacher, administrator, counselor and evangelist.”

All chaplains, not just those in the military and in prisons, “are often called on to administer the sacraments, preside at memorial services, funerals, etc.,” said Teresa Snorton, executive director of the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education in Decatur, Ga. “In cases where ordination is not

possible, a pastoral care department would have to make sure someone else were available to perform these functions," she said in an e-mail interview.

"The SBC's recent decision (not to endorse ordained female chaplains) would seriously impede the function of any SBC female chaplain," Snorton added. "In these perilous times, we need the presence of chaplains in so many sectors of public and community life. These chaplains, whether male or female, need to be equipped to respond fully to the needs of the people they are called or assigned to serve."

When Jeffrey Funk of Placentia, Calif., was a full-time hospital chaplain, he said, he averaged 75 funerals a year—including some for patients who were members of a local church "but the family felt closer to me than their pastor."

When a patient dies and the family doesn't have a church connection, they often turn to the hospital chaplain "because they have had a positive rapport" while the chaplain was ministering to the patient, explained Funk, now executive director of the Hospital Chaplain's Ministry of America.

"I'm a hospital chaplain, and I do everything a pastor would," insists Colleen Martin, a member of Western Hills Baptist Church in Fort Worth.

"We minister not only to patients but to patients' families and to staff. I have preached memorial services, conducted funerals and administered communion. I have sat by the bedside of dying patients and read their favorite Bible passages to them. I have rocked a dying infant and wept with his grandmother. I have stood all night by the bedside of a young man who bled to death. His final request was to ask me to pray for him one last time. I have heard dying patients' final confession for salvation, as well as confessions of sins they had on their conscience. I refuse to close any doors to Christian witness."

Martin's husband, Dan, also is a chaplain, working with numerous hospices and nursing homes.

They often work with aged men and women who, though “pillars of their congregations,” have been sick so long that “no one remembers them at church anymore.”

“Colleen and I did a joint baptismal service for a very ill man who requested it,” said Martin, former editor of Baptist Press, the SBC's news service. “I did a sprinkling because he was too frail to immerse. It was something he needed to do, and we were honored to do it.”

A few weeks later, the Martins did his memorial service.

“I feel I do more hands-on ministry as a hospice chaplain to patients, families, staff, co-workers than I ever did in my years as pastor of a church,” Martin insisted.

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