

Veteran pastor sees last five years in for-profit hospital as expansion of ministry

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George Gaston, vice president of ministry at Baptist Health System of San Antonio, poses with a family who moved into a Habitat for Humanity House built by volunteers from the hospital system.

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By Karen May

Baptist Health Systems

SAN ANTONIO—George Gaston served 25 years as pastor of Texas Baptist churches. For the last five, he has been vice president of a for-profit hospital system. And Gaston has found the latter role fulfilling—and the fulfillment of God’s calling for this season of his life.

Gaston serves as regional vice president of ministry for Baptist Health System in San Antonio. In that role, he has led efforts to strengthen the Christian mission and pastoral presence in the health system’s five hospitals and various other health-related businesses, as well as its presence in the community.



Gaston offers a prayer, asking God’s blessing on a Habitat for Humanity House built by volunteers from the hospital system.

He left First Baptist Church in Corpus Christi to accept the position about

the time Vanguard Health Systems acquired Baptist Health Systems— a change that took the health system from a nonprofit to for-profit status.

“I was one of the people who was against the sale to a for-profit health system,” Gaston acknowledged. “I didn’t want to lose this strong influence and opportunity to witness here in San Antonio and south Texas. When the sale became a reality, the calling was clear to me. I felt God’s leadership in my life to help get the mission off the ground from the beginning.

“Vanguard was looking for someone with a doctorate in pastoral ministry, deep ties to the BGCT and healthcare experience. I fit all those criteria and had a strong sense of God’s clear desire of this for my life.”

Gaston was pleasantly surprised by what he discovered when he arrived Baptist Health System. Vanguard had promised to continue the faith-based focus of the health system, and he soon discovered the company planned to follow through on that commitment. The first step was to give Gaston vice president-level authority within the health system. In the past five years Gaston has used the influence of his position to the fullest to accomplish what many thought could never happen.

“The fiscal and organizational stability of Baptist Health System under Vanguard has allowed us to not only maintain, but also enhance our Christian pastoral presence in the hospitals and in the community as well,” he said.

“I am in a position, along with all of our chaplains, to help shape the culture of the entire health care system. My office is right next door to the chief executive officer, Trip Pilgrim, who is a great support for our mission and values. I share retreats and planning sessions with senior management, and minister to the leadership team, which allows for the involvement of our pastoral mission in everything we do as a health system.”

Pilgrim is convinced Vanguard’s promise to keep the faith mission at the

heart of what Baptist Health System does was the right thing to do for many reasons.

“The strong association that Baptist Health System had with good works was something we did not want to lose. Healing means more than just addressing the physical problems a person may have,” says Pilgrim. “We believe that it is our mission to help heal the whole person, and that’s what our pastoral program does. Beyond that, the faith and community aspect of what George and his team does, strengthens our internal culture and adds to the wellbeing of the community as a whole.”

“We have rewritten the mission statement and our values statement so that they strengthen a clear understanding of the Christian mission here, and we have enabled the pastoral care team to be leaders in instilling the mission and values into the people that work here,” Gaston added. “With more than 5,500 employees modeling the Christian healthcare mission, that has a huge impact on the community at large.”

Under Gaston’s leadership, the pastoral-care team maintains 11 full-time chaplains in the hospitals. Eight part-time chaplains handle all of the on-call work over the weekends. The team provides 24/7 coverage in case a nurse calls in the middle of the night with a request from a patient or family member in need of counsel and support for end of life, grief and other needs. The clinical pastoral education program has grown, as well. Two clinical pastoral education supervisors work each year with six full-time students and 12 interns. Each year 18 to 20 students go through the program, learning about pastoral care.

The Christian mission of Baptist Health System is felt not only among patients, their family and friends, and the staff of the hospitals, but also extends outside the hospital walls.

“The health system has become even more community focused in

interacting with community partners in efforts to improve life in San Antonio," Gaston said.

One way the mission is felt in the community is through the preaching and teaching provided by the health system's team of pastoral care leaders in San Antonio-area congregations. As interim pastor at First Baptist Church of Boerne and Baptist Temple in San Antonio, Gaston found himself back in the pulpit almost every Sunday during his first three years in San Antonio.

"If I'm preaching, I'm happy. I feel disconnected if I'm not," he said. These days, Gaston preaches on average every other Sunday and consults with church committees and with pastors.

"The pastors can turn to me to talk about personal issues in their lives and in their churches and leadership issues in their churches. Because I am no longer identified with just one congregation, I am free to be available to all as a resource. As a pastor, you're focusing on your one church. Here, as a leader of a faith based enterprise, I get to consult with any and all."

With five hospitals located across San Antonio, Gaston constantly is in motion, traveling often to meet with chaplains in the hospitals in an effort to make sure everyone is moving in the same direction. "On a daily basis I consult with our pastoral care team in their work to help keep them unified in how we do our pastoral care. Together, we've set goals, and so it's my job to facilitate the fulfillment of those goals in the hospitals."

If he's not in the hospitals, Gaston is consulting with ministers in the community or managing the large community-based projects in which the health system is involved. In the past four years, more than 950 employees have volunteered their time and money to build six Habitat for Humanity homes. United Way giving in the health system has gone from \$109,000 in 2002 to \$416,320 in 2007.

The health system is involved in more than a dozen nonprofit health

organizations that support the health and wellness of children and families. Other outreach projects bring health care educators and information into local churches.

Gaston also helped re-establish an employee crisis fund that raises money for employees who find themselves in financial need because of illness, divorce or other unforeseen circumstances. "Our employees have embraced this opportunity to help their fellow workers, which has been very gratifying to see," Gaston said.

Gaston and his team also are working to create a Center for Pastoral Ministry in San Antonio. "This will expand our ability to teach ministry students about pastoral ministry and pastoral counseling, and to provide actual ministry for persons in the crisis times of life."

Gaston hopes to have the program up and running by January of 2009. "We are in the process of establishing the endowment now, so anyone interested in helping out with that can give me a call," Gaston said, grinning.

He believes the biggest impact that's been made since Baptist's transition from a nonprofit to a for-profit system has been the ability to help shape the Christian mission and values of an entire health system and to connect those up with its employees.

"We challenge and encourage our employees to work in ways that reflect the compassionate Christian mission and values of our health system. We ask all of them, whatever their faith, to simply respect the fact that we are a Christian faith-based organization and share in the mission of the BGCT.

"In addition, our promise as a system is to practice business and medical ethics that are consistent with the Christian faith—the very same ethics that were practiced when we were officially affiliated with the BGCT. You would not expect to have this focus in a for-profit health system.

“I always like to quote Kent Wallace, the COO of Vanguard, in saying ‘our tax status does not dictate our culture.’ We are paying taxes, but that doesn’t mean we can’t have a Christian set of values. People think that when you sell a nonprofit, that you give up the ability to render Christian care. We have not done that at all. We have strengthened and built upon what was done before us. We’ve got a wonderful ministry here.”

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