

# Chaplains share hope creatively in COVID-19 context

March 26, 2020

Chaplain John Bender recites Psalm 23, ageless words of comfort in times of fear or threat.

As he pauses, he looks up to his listeners, residents of Buckner Parkway Place in Houston. A single camera lens stares back at him. He's delivering his message on Parkway Place's closed-circuit television system.

Like each chaplain at all six Buckner Retirement Services Communities, Bender is seeking creative ways to share messages of faith, hope and comfort in the wake of social distancing measures in response to the coronavirus.

Since the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic began to take shape in the United States, Americans have responded with measures that range from social distancing to canceling large-scale gatherings to even city-wide lockdowns.

Nowhere have these safety measures been more critical than among the senior adult population, deemed by most health-related entities as the group most at risk for contracting the coronavirus.

Following standards set by the Center for Disease Control and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, Buckner took quick action to ensure the health of residents and staff, limiting outside access to only essential health care providers as well as promoting distance between each resident internally.

## **‘God is walking with us’**

While the safety strategies created distance from potential harm, they also created distance from residents’ churches, community worship meetings and each other for groups larger than 10. It’s a situation that might seem to lessen residents’ hope, but the chaplains are fighting the coronavirus threat in their own unique way—from the soul.

“I have encouraged residents to read Psalm 23 every day because of its familiarity, as well as the message that God is walking with us,” Bender said.

Spreading messages of hope and comfort is key to reinforcing residents’ faith, he said.

“Each conversation I have is salted with the concept that: ‘We have faith in our God. This crisis did not catch him by surprise.’”

Chaplain Daniel Carpenter of Buckner Calder Woods in Beaumont echoed Bender’s approach.

“I have spoken to several people about the sovereignty of God. I also try to get them to think of all the ways God has provided for them and protected them up to this point,” he said. “And I’m talking a lot about anxiety. I’ve been using Philippians 4 as a launching point to talk to them about faith and the presence of Jesus in their lives.”

## **Finding creative ways to offer comfort**

But to reach their flocks, the group must come up with creative ways to spread that word and meet constituents’ needs.

“We normally have two to three people from our campus in the hospital

every day and I typically visit them there, but now the hospital, as of today, has limited their visitation and I can no longer go to see them,” said Chaplain Kevin McSpadden of Baptist Retirement Community in San Angelo. “Now I just call our residents and talk with them over the phone.”

He noted that while the independent living Sunday morning chapel service has been canceled, he recently learned how to broadcast live services on YouTube and will be using that technology to reach residents.

“I still do a worship service and a sit-down Bible study at our Sagecrest Alzheimer’s facility,” he said. “Both of the open area pods at Sagecrest are very large and we literally spread the people out and go on with our services. At both Sagecrest and The Crest, volunteers can no longer come in to help me with the music, but I manage to make everything work with music on my laptop.”

David Mann, chaplain for Ventana by Buckner in Dallas, also adopted the “spread out” social distancing approach, modified even further by the 10-person-per-room limit.

“Yesterday’s worship service was interesting here at Ventana,” he explained. “We signed up the members who wanted to attend in increments of 10 and had four worship services, at 2:30, 3, 3:30 and 4. Needless to say, I was very tired afterward, and our poor pianist was exhausted as well.”

## **Making necessary adjustments**

Rick Webb, chaplain for Buckner Westminster Place in Longview, acknowledges the importance of smaller chapel services since many churches have had to cancel services.

“I am leading it myself—music and message—so no outside person is engaged,” Webb said, noting he is taking additional precautions to lessen

the possibility of exposure to residents. "I am limiting my life to Buckner and home and no other people than Westminster Place and my family."

In addition to altering his personal life, Webb is also adapting technology to reach his residents.



Daniel Carpenter takes his musical talents to Calder Woods/Beaumont residents. (Buckner Photo)

"The technology is being adapted so I can post devotionals and encouragement to the residents via the in-house cable television system. Along with that medium, I have repeatedly given them my cell phone number as an on-call resource and encourage them to call."

Carpenter also has been playing guitar and singing for residents who can't leave their rooms and to help calm nerves heightened by isolation or fear.

"There is a spectrum of response here," Carpenter said. "Many residents are starting to get cabin fever, but some of them like being isolated. Some are sitting at their doors in the hallway so they can talk to neighbors across the hall. Some are fearful. Most are understanding (of the safety measures that have been put into place)."

## **Minister to staff in stressful times**

In addition to ministry to residents, each chaplain noted their ministries seek to reach staff members as well.

Mann encouraged Ventana associates to continue living out the Buckner Retirement Services mantra of "Inspiring happiness" while serving others.

Mann shared a prayer with the group and reminded them that "as we become open to each day at hand, and its challenges, may we remember that we are called and equipped (every position is a sacred vocation); may we step forward with a non-anxious presence and seek to learn, teach, and lead by example. May the Holy Spirit grant us abundant resources for the journey!"

"I have been going around visiting with staff, listening to them and empathizing where I can," echoed Carpenter. "A lot of them are anxious too, so I try to calm their fears and cheer them up. I have also offered to help them in any way that I can if they seem stressed."

Ministering to staff, though, also includes time to renew and minister to themselves and their families amid their own concerns.

"It's definitely causing some stress and anxiety in my home," Carpenter said. "I have two young boys and a third boy on the way. The hovering

threat of a shelter-in-place scenario is a frequent concern. My wife is due in 10 weeks, so the thought of being separated from them for up to eight weeks is not a pleasant one.”

“The only thing that has made a change in my life is the unknowing of if or when we will go into on-campus quarantine” Bender said. “The ministry has not changed here other than it is a more focused work. But the unknowing of if I will return home at night has an impact on my family.”