

Hospital chaplains serve in the midst of a pandemic

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DALLAS—Texas Baptist chaplains remain hard at work in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Protocols have changed, where bedside conversations have been replaced by phone calls, and hugs have given way to encouraging smiles, but the gospel message remains the same.

“The coronavirus has drastically altered the healthcare setting and life at the hospital, not just for the doctors and nurses but also for our chaplains, whose main role is to offer comfort, provide support and offer hope,” said Candace Zelner, a chaplain at Baylor University Medical Center in Dallas.

“Those things remain unchanged, but the way we do ministry has radically changed. Chaplains have been asked to innovatively use research and collaborate with other chaplains systemwide as we try to figure out the best way to support and care for our patients.”

Chaplains at Texas Baptists’ partner health care institutions are supported by gifts to Texas Baptists’ Cooperative Program. More than \$618,000 is given annually to the four health care partners to provide spiritual care to patients and families across Texas.

Hospital workers face increased stress

Mark Grace, chief mission and ministry officer for Baylor Scott & White Health, has observed an increase in patients, staff and families seeking out spiritual guidance in troubled times.



A chaplain counsels and prays with a patient at Baptist Hospitals of Southeast Texas in Beaumont. Since COVID-19, most chaplains have been limited to phone visits with patients, but they have ministered extensively to hospital staff on the front lines. (Photo courtesy of Texas Baptists)

Grace explained that by June 2020, there were 2,800 more staff visits across the Baylor Scott & White Health network than all of 2019. Doctors, nurses and all those working in the hospital are facing increased stress as they struggle to treat a virus with no known cure and risk contamination themselves as they interact with patients.

In addition to providing spiritual counseling and support to those who need it, the health system's Mission and Ministry Office also engaged with the local community to help churches adjust to online services. They also produced 25,000 facemasks and 5,000 face shields for use in medical centers and non-profits.

For Zelner, who serves as the bereavement officer in addition to her role as a chaplain, visitation restrictions have been the hardest change to hospital

procedures.

Usually, Baylor University Medical Center is full of families and friends visiting patients, but visitors have been severely restricted to prevent the potential spread of the coronavirus. For non-COVID-19 patients, one visitor is allowed per 24-hour period. For patients battling COVID-19, visitors are not allowed, except in end-of-life situations, where one visitor is allowed.

Chaplains innovate to help grieving families

Zelner, who has studied the effects of grief during this pandemic, explained that, while these measures keep people safe, they often prevent grief from being processed. To combat this, Zelner has compiled bereavement packages to help families dealing with a loss. In the package, there is a letter signed by all of the doctors, nurses and hospital staff who worked directly with the deceased family member. There is also an EKG strip of the patient's heart rhythm from before they died.

Zelner called the daughter of a man who had recently died from COVID-19 to explain the bereavement package. The woman was excited to receive the package and said she would make copies of the EKG strip to pass out to other family members.

“With all the changes that the coronavirus has brought, the one thing that has not changed is our capacity and our ability to journey with our patients and our families,” Zelner said.

“This bereavement package we have put together gives us an opportunity to offer hope and comfort in a way that is different but still important.”

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