

Hospital chaplains help heal the spirit on pandemic frontlines

Rev. Eamonn McNerney is on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While medical staff are working around the clock to heal the body during this crisis, Father McNerney and other chaplains are tasked with healing the spirit – a ministry that’s busier than ever and, needed more than ever, as the world races to contain the spread of the coronavirus.

“At the moment, it’s the scale of these events,” Father McNerney, chaplain at the University of Alberta Hospital campus, said between shifts. “We’re used to dealing with those traumatic, personal situations. But this now is very different because the whole of society is on lockdown and traumatized. That’s a very Orwellian, Dante-esque, surreal situation to be in.

“It’s the scale of this that is somewhat overwhelming.”

As of April 6, there were 1,348 cases of COVID-19 in Alberta and 15,920 cases in Canada. Twenty-four Albertans have died of the disease, and 361 have recovered. The COVID-19 crisis has shed a light on the medical profession, but also on the role of hospital chaplains in a patient’s healing.

Chaplains are focused on the spiritual health and well-being of patients, family members and staff. They are part of a patient’s team helping them to heal mind, body and soul.

“Chaplaincy, first and foremost, is about a relationship,” said Teresa Kellendonk, the director of pastoral care for the Archdiocese of Edmonton, which supervises the six Roman Catholic hospital chaplains. “The clinical part of health care is I come and treat that part of your body. But who comes and treats the heart and the soul? A chaplain has an opportunity to do that.”

The six hospital chaplains, both lay people and clergy, serve at the Royal Alexandra and University of Alberta hospitals. Between them, they provide both spiritual care, and the Catholic sacraments – from Baptism to Holy Communion to Confession and Anointing of the Sick.

Father McNerney has served on the U of A hospital campus, which includes the Stollery Children’s Hospital and Mazankowski Heart Institute, for more than eight years. But he has never experienced anything quite like the COVID-19 crisis.

McNerney can’t divulge how many COVID-19 patients he has seen, or other personal details. But he can describe what those patients are feeling. Chief among them are loneliness, and questions of mortality, the meaning of life and

the presence of God.

"It's the uncertainty of the whole thing," McNerney explained. "When is this all going to end? And people's mortality. 'I'm not going to survive this. I feel alone. Is my treatment going to be cancelled?'"

"All patients who are caught up in this crisis are suffering through the unpredictability of the condition. A big, big factor has been the restriction of visits and now no visitors in the hospital at all. These restrictions are for good reasons and are subject to special exceptions made by medical staff on site. In fact, that really is a big, big suffering for the patients, for their family members and for the nurses and doctors too. It's just incredibly difficult to see patients who will not be able to have their loved ones bedside."

While there is a work-around hospital restrictions through phones and technology, it may not be effective for some elderly patients or others depending on their condition.

"Their spiritual, psychological suffering increases dramatically through the present situation," McNerney said. "The chaplains and staff members and family member are trying to deal with this creatively."

At the same time, Father McNerney said, those same restrictions and physical distancing requirements are needed and welcomed to keep both patient and staff safe. Even in the biblical story of The Prodigal Son, McNerney notes, the father loved his son even though he was far away.

"I think it's important to remember that all of these restrictions that are in place, they are obviously signs of people with concrete love for each other," McNerney said. "Jesus is present, in a very real way at the moment, in doctors and nurses, in those scientists and those who are trying to bring a resolution to this present situation. Our night is not completely dark."



Sometimes, chaplains say, all a patient needs is a listening ear.

“We’re also here to provide a listening presence for the patients, to listen to their stories, to hear their lament,” said Yvonne Robert, a lay chaplain at the Royal Alexandra Hospital. “Often they are sad being here. They’re confused. They’re anxious. They just want to go home. We hear them. We pray with them. We just listen.”

“Sometimes it’s just five minutes to say ‘Hey, we’re here if you need us.’ Other times it can be an hour we’ll spend with them,” she said. “We visit with them. We pray. We meet their families. We hear their woes. And I’m here Monday to Friday.”

Robert is quick to add: “The nursing staff, they do an amazing job, but they don’t have the time to sit beside the patient and to hear them, and to cry with them when they are crying. That’s what we take the time to do ... Yes, it’s wonderful.”

Like all staff, chaplains take precautions when dealing with any patient, regardless of whether they have COVID-19, in certain cases. That includes wearing a face mask, gown, gloves, head and eye protection and keeping a two-metre distance from all the patients and each other.

Father McNerney praises the team of the chaplains, medical and hospital staff who are helping patients during the COVID-19 crisis, which comes at a time –

Holy Week – when Catholics recall the courage and selflessness of Christ Himself.

“Everybody helps everybody else. There are no superheroes here. Everybody is a team. Everybody is helping each other,” he said. “I would never think a month ago that I would spend so much time sanitizing our office area so that members of my team, and the staff chaplains, social workers that they would be safe.”

While chaplains take a certain amount of risk in their contacts with patients, Father McNerney said there is also a collective effort to help each individual who is suffering – and hope for the future.

“The anti-virus to the virus is actually fraternity, is unity, is co-responsibility. There’s something tremendous happening there. Each of us has a responsibility for each other. And that is an amazing experience and witness to see when the Gospel is really made concrete.”