

# THE HOSPICE CHAPLAIN

## Who are they and what do they do?

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Ref: Harvey, T. - 'Who is the chaplain anyway? Philosophy and integration of hospice chaplaincy.' - The American Journal of Hospice and Palliative Care, September/October 1996.

Hospice Chaplaincy entails a combination of duties and skills. As an IDG team member, you will need to look at hospice chaplaincy, both through the eye of the terminally ill patients and of the Chaplain for further clarification of his/hers duties.

They are first and foremost "pastoral Counselors". Pastoral Counselors are different from Chaplains in that their main concern is the emotional welfare of the patient. Because they are chaplains, they are primarily interested in the patient's relationship with God. Please notice that there are two primary concerns in this statement:

- Emotional Welfare
- Relationship with God

The Chaplain/Pastoral Counselor unify the two concerns into one, because one is always linked to the other. For instance, a terminally ill patient that reject chaplain visits, may very well mean that the patient is fearful of rejection from God, specially if the patient believes that he/she somehow contributed to the illness. Fear of dying, might be no fear of dying at all, but rather, be fear of what happens after death. Anger, betrayal, guilt, threat, powerlessness, fractured relationships, are some of the emotions/problems. Emotional problems, are some of the things that given time, the chaplain can help to mend and heal.

Before the Chaplain is able to offer any assistance to a patient, he/she needs to know how the patient defines the chaplain's role.

### Who does the patient think the hospice Chaplain is?

**Shaman** — to be honored and worshipped. The patient often sees the minister as a very learned person. This results in feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, and often raises the issues of shame, doubt and guilt.

**Miracle worker** — holder of supernatural means for cure. Often the patient will openly solicit the aid of the chaplain through either the laying on of the hands, prayer, or open request. The Chaplain needs to be careful with words in order to bring healing & support, without giving false hopes.

**Bible answers** — Patients want biblical proof of the role and image of God. Patients also want biblical answers to questions like: "why", "why me".

**Telephone operator**— one with the priority means to talk to God. Often a patient feels unable, unprepared or unworthy to talk to God or they feel that God only listens to the holy ones.

**Social worker** — provide community connections and services for meals, caregivers, financial aid, support groups. Sometimes those needs are real; sometimes the patient wants to test the Chaplain to find out how much he/she does care.

**Interpreter** — explanation and clarification of medical information, also for dreams, visions, and revelations. Because the Chaplain, normally enters into the room without an agenda and appears without a schedule, the patient normally takes the opportunity to talk about those dreams and visions that are sometimes frightening.

**Arbiter** — reconciliation between patient and God or others, bringer of peace. Very often the Chaplain is viewed as the one who is capable to enter to an otherwise volatile situation and promote reconciliation.

**Ticket agent** — assurance of acceptance through congregational rituals such as baptism, confession, communion, marriage, etc. Being near death will bring about the need to mend and straighten the relationship with God.

**Friend** — companionship in times of loneliness or isolation, confidante. Many of hospice's patients have few or no visitors.

**Guide** — request for lessons in dying, God's acceptance, and meaning of suffering often patient asks permission to die. That is the area in which the Chaplain can be the most effective, after all, ministering to the dying is to bring about the realization that Life & Death are two sides of the same coin, and no matter how we live our lives, God is pure unconditional love & forgiveness and he will welcome us all back home

### **Who do I think the Hospice Chaplain is?**

**Fellow journeyman** —the one that walks along side, reads the signs, participates (rather than observe) the journey. I believe that the Chaplain has the obligation to empathize with patients. They need someone to experience the road with them, not as an observer, but rather as a participant.

**Student** — continual learning through interaction with the dying. Hospice Chaplain needs to present themselves as equals, not as a superior. Each patient I have supported in their death journey has taught me valuable lessons on the meaning of such words as *heaven, hell, Sanctification, reconciliation* and so on.

**Insurance agent** — provide assurance that things will be done according to the patient's wishes. These may include last wishes, revelations of family secrets to be delivered after patient death, follow up with the family and funeral arrangements.

**Advocate** - Always have the patient's best interests at heart and in action.

**Healer**— Obviously. We are not talking here about the common meaning of Healing, which is to make it whole. Helping someone to die may be very healing indeed. Under the concept of mind, body & spirit, the Chaplain can be very effective (better yet if the Chaplain is also an energy healer) helping the patient's healing emotions and the soul; repair ruptures of the mind and spirit resulting from guilt, shame, depression, fear, anger, etc.

**Teacher** —Teach new ways of coping, communicating, forgiving, accepting; also to correct wrong assumptions regarding dying, theological assumptions.

**Stranger** — it might sound like a contrast of the patient's view, that the Chaplain should be a friend, being a stranger sometimes is necessary and might be all that the patient needs. A stranger has no personal agenda. There are things that are easy to tell to a stranger than to a friend. If there is never an allusion to commitment there isn't fear of abandonment or alienation.

**Servant** – Of all the chaplains' roles, this is the utmost. It might mean to sit by the patient in silence; listen without being asked, fetch without expecting reward, kneel without expectation, request peace even when we do not feel it or understand it ourselves. Love without expecting love. The Chaplain wipes the tears, holds the vomit pan and wipes spittle. Listens without being judgmental and prays asking for the strength to share the death road with the patient.

## **Conclusion**

Unlike the other hospice team members, the chaplains have no medical training. They run no tests, carry no medications and give no shots. They come to the patient bedside unarmed. They have only themselves to offer. It makes the Chaplain very vulnerable. It is through this vulnerability that both Chaplain and patients travel together the death road, knowing that they do not have all the answers.

## **How does the Chaplain interact with hospice staff?**

- Support their work
- Encourage their journey
- Listens to their concerns
- Speak the truth in love
- Acknowledge the bad times along with the good
- Remember the dead & rejoice the life

