Ministry of Care

Ministry at the End of Life

by Franchon Pirkl, OSF

For the past 17 years I have had the privilege of serving as hospice chaplain in the Owatonna and surrounding areas. We serve patients in 5 counties in their own homes and at care centers. We also provide care for up to 8 patients at our community owned Homestead Hospice House in Owatonna. Our hospice census is 25 to 30 patients with an annual count of 150 to 200. As years pass, I don’t always remember their names, but their faces and remarkable spirit are always close to my heart.

There are many stories about these amazing folks who often entrust their lives, their hopes and the “what next” questions! Many are strengthened by and rely on deep faith and are a part of a church community. Others do not have a faith or religion belief, but often they know God through an unmistakable spiritual bond.

Two years ago, Bill, a strong-willed and feisty patient in his 90’s, arrived at the Hospice House and made it clear he did not want any (expletives deleted!) ministers or church people hovering around his bed! As chaplain, I was forewarned and stayed clear for a few days. One day, I had been working in the hospice gardens and dressed in a straw hat and grubbies, and decided to take him a bouquet of flowers. Bill didn’t seem threatened or annoyed by the visit and assumed I was one of the gardeners. I discovered he was an avid gardener and we had a delightful conversation. These visits continued, always with fresh flowers, and eventually turned into deeper conversations about his weakening condition and the final days. Bill revealed a deep spiritual core and eventually began to find peace and healing from a hurt he and his family suffered at the hands of a minister [who refused to bury his unbaptised stillborn baby] many years ago. As he lay dying, family, friends and “the gardener” were present to help walk him home to God. Daily, I see so clearly, the gifts, competence and dedication of my colleagues in hospice outreach. The interdisciplinary circle of care involves the total patient and also includes the family and loved ones.

Advanced care planning is an important conversation that our team has with patients, their families and physicians. End-of-life issues that are addressed prior to crisis times, help to provide a more informed, peaceful and quality of life experience as Sister Death approaches. This ministry is indeed a privilege, a challenge and a blessing. Each day, each moment, we learn that in gentle and compassionate care for the dying, we learn also to care more wisely for the living – and for life itself.