Why I Chose Chaplaincy

Are you considering becoming a chaplain?

More than 10,000 chaplains of different faiths serve in diverse settings including: hospitals, hospice, palliative care, mental health, and other settings where people experience life’s pain and setbacks, and seeking to understand their lives from a faith perspective. You can be with them offering them hope, healing, and strength.

NACC Chaplains share their touching and heartwarming stories.
Father Herb Wheatly

In 1982 I was appointed pastor of a large parish in Tigard, Oregon. I was feeling the need for further education as I dealt with the problems my parishioners were presenting. I began taking courses in Pastoral Counseling at the University of Portland. I found them energizing, so I continued for the next 3 years taking various courses and pursuing a Master’s degree in Pastoral Counseling. As part of the degree program, I was required to take one quarter of Clinical Pastoral Education. Since I also had to do a practicum, I convinced my mentors at the University to allow me to take a year of Clinical Pastoral Education that would count as my requirement for both CPE and my practicum. In 1986 I took 4 quarters of Clinical Pastoral Education at Providence Portland Medical Center. It was this experience that led me to consider becoming a hospital chaplain.

I had been in parish work for 17 years and a pastor for 7 of those years. I didn’t mind working with people, but I wasn’t into all the administrative tasks that went along with it. Don’t get me wrong, I could do the administrative tasks, but I didn’t find them as satisfying as helping people on a one to one basis. I completed my assignment in the Tigard Parish in 1985. Since I was in transition, I convinced my Franciscan superiors to allow me to complete my Master’s program before accepting another assignment. With the freedom to pursue my Master’s degree in Pastoral Counseling came the freedom to work at Providence Portland for the entire year of 1986. I enjoyed my CPE experience. I loved working with the patients and staff. I seemed to find my element as I entered into the pastoral relationship with the individuals coming to the hospital as patients and their families. As I was going through CPE, the head of the Pastoral Care Department asked me if I would consider coming back as a chaplain after the completion of my degree. I told her I would think about it. It didn’t take me very long to realize that working as a chaplain was a very good fit for me.

I have always done better in a one to one encounter rather than with groups or crowds of people. Working with individual patients was wonderful. Their pain was real and my experiences with them showed me that they were not interested in the usual kinds of chit chat, but were willing to go to the deepest part of themselves to discuss what was of most concern to them. Their spirituality, their concept of God, their desire to be healed not only physically, but emotionally, psychologically and spiritually as well was real. I am not sure who benefited more from my encounters with them ... the patient or myself. But I do know that the ministry has been so fulfilling that I have continued being a chaplain here at Providence for over 20 years. And I also know that this is where I wish to continue to minister to God’s people as long as I am able.
Josie Rodriguez

How I Became a Chaplain

My journey toward becoming a chaplain came in roundabout way. My undergraduate work was in speech therapy and I had taught adult education part time through the San Diego Community College District for 16 years. That position was convenient as a wife and mother of three small boys. As my children grew up I realized how interested I was in the medical field and began taking pre-nursing courses and was accepted into a nursing program. Like many journeys, there are often forks in the road, detours, yield signs and reasons to wait and to be patient in the waiting.

While waiting for the nursing program to begin I read an article in the newspaper that spoke of hospital chaplaincy and showed a woman chaplain at the bedside of a young patient in the emergency room of a hospital. It was at that moment that I knew that that was what I wanted to do. My classes changed from microbiology and physiology to four units as a chaplain intern in Clinical Pastoral Education at Sharp Memorial Hospital in San Diego. I was the first Catholic laywoman accepted in that program. I became certified through NACC and began working toward a master’s degree in Practical Theology at the University of San Diego where I graduated two years later.

This intense and grace-filled time of education and training ended where another blessed time began. I was hired as a clinical chaplain at Mercy Hospital and worked there for 12 years in the Family Birth Unit, Pediatrics, Cardiology, Orthopedic, Intensive Care and Emergency. I had also been interested in hospice care and so left Mercy and began working as the pediatric chaplain at San Diego Hospice.

The memory of the many courageous adults, children and families that I met throughout the years will stay with me forever. I believed that my work as a chaplain was more of a calling than a job and felt that I was meant to be in this profession at that time in my life. I loved working with patients and families and enjoyed teaching workshops in spirituality to student nurses and staff, and writing articles for professional journals.

I have been asked many times how I took care of myself as I cared for others. My answer was to work toward having a balance between caring for patients and caring for myself through other things that I liked to do. One of the ways I cared for self was to write poetry to honor the patients and families I met along the way and to try to make sense of the tragedies I witnessed. My book of these poems, Waiting Rooms of the Heart was published in 2005 and can be viewed and ordered from my website www.josierodriguez.com
Logan Rutherford

I suspect my entrée into the field of pastoral care as a chaplain is not atypical. Prior to entering the Seminary to begin the Masters of Divinity program, my professional experience was in the legal field. I was employed by Baker Botts, LLP, a large law firm, as a trademark legal assistant. At Baker Botts, I helped manage a large portfolio of domestic and international trademarks and domain names. Working with many large international companies, I enjoyed being part of the strategic planning function of protecting a company’s intellectual property assets. I left Baker Botts to work for ConocoPhillips Company as a Trademark Legal Assistant. While these positions were well paying jobs, I was not satisfied.

In 2004, I was searching for a way to combine my faith life and career. Since I was dating and planned to marry, I knew the priesthood was not an option. After researching different possibilities, I learned about the profession of hospital chaplaincy and became immediately interested and motivated to pursue this further. After learning that the Masters of Divinity degree is required for most jobs, I met with the dean of St. Mary’s Seminary and enrolled in the M. Div program at the University of Saint Thomas, School of Theology. I began volunteering with the Catholic Chaplain Corps., a network of lay volunteers who minister to patients in Houston Medical Center. I completed the one-year training program and was commissioned by the Diocese of Galveston-Houston as a Pastoral Assistant. In April 2005, I began visiting patients at The Methodist Hospital, a large diverse hospital in Houston’s Medical Center.

I was later accepted into the CPE program at The Methodist Hospital. Upon completion of my residency, I was offered and accepted a full-time staff chaplain position with the department of Spiritual Care and Education. I have been there since completing my residency.

While the work is challenging and demanding at times, my experience thus far as a full-time staff chaplain has affirmed the decision to leave the corporate environment of which I had been a part. I feel I have been called by God to a ministerial role helping others in time of need.
Mary D. Davis

Out of arrogance and anger...

My journey into chaplaincy and CPE supervision has its roots, as it does for many persons entering ministry, in the death of a family member. I was 15 years old when my older sister died. The contrived and empty comments so typically given in grief situations did not sit well with me. In the arrogance of adolescence and through the anger stage of my grief I made a vow “to learn how to minister to people and teach others how to do it better”.

To that end, I embarked upon an undergraduate degree in theology. Not being allowed to study in a Catholic seminary in the early 1970s, I studied at a Catholic university and supported myself by working as a unit secretary in a local hospital. Drawn to the patients and families in their crises, I was challenged by my nursing supervisor to “get on one side of the desk or the other”. Someone referred me to CPE, which was tailor-made for me – I did not want to abandon my love of theology, but clearly needed practical ministry skills.

Six units of CPE in acute care and mental health settings landed me a chaplaincy job. I tell people now that I spent the first years of my chaplaincy work explaining to people that “yes, laypeople/women/people my age can be chaplains”: at times, I was frustrated by wanting to minister yet spending so much time catechizing in regard to the Catholic church and concepts of ministry.

A year into my first position, I was diagnosed with malignant melanoma.

Thinking I might not have all the time in the world led me to recognize that while I loved bedside chaplaincy, I found more energy in helping others gain ministry skills and learn about themselves as ministers. I took on completion of a Master’s degree in theology, Supervisory CPE units and eventual certification at age 30, a husband, and births of three children.

Twenty seven years later, my ministry within pastoral care and education, along with my vocation as a wife and mother, continues to be an incredibly fulfilling and blessed life.
Deacon Darwin Dupr

My Call To Chaplaincy.

I never planned to become a chaplain; the thought never crossed my mind until I was encouraged to take a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education, CPE, in 2000.

Ministry for me started in 1974 when my parish priest asked if I would consider becoming a Eucharistic Minister. I was very surprised, my response was, “You’re asking me to be a Eucharistic Minister?” My priest said, “Pray over it, and let me know your decision.”

Somewhat in shock, I thought only the holy of holies distribute Holy Communion; far from being that type of person.

After two weeks of discernment and prayer, my answer was yes. After participating in the Eucharistic Minister’s training, the sick and shut-ins of the parish were visited every Sunday after Mass. The visit consisted of scripture readings and giving Holy Communion to the sick and shut-ins. Others members of my parish became Eucharistic Ministers and assisted me by bringing Communion to the homebound. This ministry continues today.

In 1994, after retiring from the Kansas City, Missouri Police Department, I became a volunteer chaplain at a local hospital. My duties were to visit with patients and distribute Communion when appropriate. Later that same year, I became a volunteer chaplain at the Jackson County Detention Center, assisting the priest with Mass, and later conducting liturgy of the word with Holy Communion service once a week in the county jail.

Six years later, in 2000, the chaplain at the hospital where I volunteered, a CPE Supervisor, asked if I ever thought about taking CPE. He thought I would make a very good chaplain saying, “CPE will help you become a professional chaplain.” After CPE, I was certified with NACC.
I started chaplaincy as a Catholic priest doing sacramental ministry in a large teaching hospital. While there, I fell in love and felt God’s calling to the married state. I did get married. I also knew that God had led me to the pastoral ministry and felt continued to be called in that direction.

Knowing that it would be hard to pursue without getting the proper education and certification, I embarked on those tasks. I had never completed my Masters degree in theology and yet had much of that background in seminary. So I inquired about what I would need to do to complete that. I was able to get some classes and write a paper on ethics. My seminary accepted my work and awarded me with a Masters of Divinity degree. At the same time I enrolled in a Clinical Pastoral Education group to get the required units to be certified.

My classes were so revealing to me about myself and my way of doing ministry. It helped me get in touch with those blind places in my ministry and helped prepare me for future ministry in this realm. I was so grateful for what I learned, I even entered the supervisory tract after several years doing ministry. I continue to this day to feel the calling of the Lord to be one of God’s pastoral ministers, some 22 years after entering this ministry. All the stumbling blocks that I expected because of my marriage never materialized in my case and I continue to find God’s hands in all I do.
Thoughts on why I became a chaplain...

To be a chaplain is, for me, a journey. I have the honor and privilege to walk alongside, to be a companion with, to be with another person on his or her life’s journey.

Poignant moments arise and God’s grace flows freely.

One such moment emerged as I held open sacred space which allowed a mother and son to connect again on the deepest level of love. Her son, dying of AIDS; she struggling to put her love for him into words. He a self-professed agnostic; she a firm believer in God. She finally lifted her hands up and shared, “I do not have the words to tell you how much I love you.” He responded in a soft, gentle voice, “That’s where God is, in the inexpressible.” As a chaplain I am blessed to walk on holy ground and to be present when God’s love overflows.

Other moments are still, quiet moments, as I sit with a gentleman living with dementia. He no longer knows his family. I sit next to him saying to him I enjoy visiting him. He looks at me with furrowed brow and says, “why?” I reply “because I think you are a wonderful person.” Moments slide by as he seems to ponder my response. He looks at me and says, “That’s true.” Somewhere it resonates with him that he is loved. God’s presence fills the space between us.

Another moment involves struggle as a father and I break the news to his nine year old son that his mother has died. To hold them in love, to allow them to cry, to give them a space to be safe and together is one more facet of being present on another person’s journey of life.

These are moments that touched my life. I received on many occasions thoughts of thanks from patients and families sharing how the presence of a chaplain touched their lives. I know there are many more moments we do not know how the seed planted flowers in another’s life.
Sister Bernadette Selinsky

Called by Jesus on a lake

Having been a church and school musician for nineteen years, plus giving private music lessons all those years, I was literally burned to a crisp. I did not have the energy to learn even one more child's name. Toward the end of a year of discernment I met a friend of mine whom I had not seen in a long time. We spent some summer evenings talking together in a paddle boat on Silver Lake near our Convent Motherhouse in Manitowoc, Wisconsin.

My friend shared that she was in a time of transition from nursing into becoming a hospital chaplain. The more she talked, the more chaplaincy felt like a “fit” for me, too. I argued with myself that “there’s no way God could call me to a new ministry in the middle of a lake doing something I so enjoyed doing: paddle boating. How could I be called to new work while having so much fun? How could I be called to new work in such a stress-free environment as boating on a calm lake?” It didn’t make any sense to me until I realized that Jesus called some of His apostles on and near the Sea of Galilee. If they could be called on the Sea of Galilee, why couldn’t I be called on Silver Lake?

Once I realized that this call really could and did make sense, I began to think more seriously about it. Testing revealed three things about myself: I needed to work with people (not things), I needed to share my faith, and all this needed to occur in a medical setting. With the blessing and support of my religious community, the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity, I began CPE training.

The rest is history: I have been a happy, certified chaplain for many years. I can’t think of anything that would make me happier. I am grateful!
I spent over 35 years earning a living to support my family of 5 daughters and one wife as a marketing executive for Johnson Wax, Racine, WI and L&F Products, Montvale, NJ. I liked the work but I knew it was not why I was put on this earth. Following a disastrous career move to Japan as Director of Marketing for Japan Johnson, I was very depressed upon returning to the states to a position I had years earlier. At a men’s retreat in the Milwaukee archdiocese seminary, I asked for the key to the seminary’s pool to swim in the morning. I arrived at 4:30AM to find a dark, Olympic-size pool and I was unable to find the light switch. Being very careful, I started to swim when I felt a visceral ‘presence’ of God. It would not go away so I stopped and asked Him what He wanted. A very clear answer came -- “I have something very special for you to do but I can’t tell you what it is because you couldn’t handle it right now.” Twenty years later, I understood what the message meant.

My first son-in-law died of a rare brain tumor in 1996 and the experience of setting up a hospice for the last 5 weeks of his life touched something deep within me. I did not know what it was but since my wife was in her 3rd unit of CPE (she is now a NACC-certified hospice chaplain), I thought maybe chaplaincy was something I should look into. I signed up for the basic unit of CPE and followed that with 3 more units and was eventually hired as a chaplain at Hackensack University Medical Center where I worked for the next 8 years. Shortly after being hired in 1998, I visited a patient who was dying and had asked to see a chaplain. It took three visits to make a connection with this patient and when I finally was able to talk to him, I asked him fairly directly how he felt about what was about to happen. He told me he was afraid and I asked him what was he afraid of. He said he was afraid God did not love him. Being a rather new chaplain, this was the first time I had ever heard this from a patient, but far from the last. My inclination would be to reflect on that a moment but I found my lips moving and uttering an absolutely preposterous statement —“Suppose I could prove to you tonight that God loves you?” To which the patient (and me) said, “Oh yeah, how are you going to do that?” Before I could think of an answer, out of my mouth came the following words— “I was born 56 years ago to be here tonight to assure you that God loves you.” Frank literally ‘melted’ in front of me, we prayed together and he died later that night. Driving home after work I realized that the message I had received was not just for Frank but also for me in response to a vision in a pool 20 years earlier.

Talk about mystery, meaning and movement in the Spirit! I have loved the ministry of being a hospital chaplain since day one and am currently looking to return to this wonderful ministry after taking a break from it as a Director of Pastoral Care for St. Vincent’s Medical Center in Jacksonville and a Pastoral Associate at St. Luke Roman Catholic Church, Ho-Ho-Kus, NJ.
A friend of mine once asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. Has anyone ever asked you that question? It seems silly because I don’t know what “grown up” means. However, I’ve always known what I wanted to do; I just didn’t know if one career could contain all of it. I searched for a long time.

Out of high school I worked as a cleaning boy maintaining condominiums in the Rockies of Colorado. I was offered an assistant manager’s job but turned it down to go off to college to study business and run Cross Country for the University of South Florida. I changed my major and graduated from the University of Florida, where I received my Bachelors degree, then worked as a recreation therapist and a part-time exercise therapist (a job I invented with a government grant). I wanted to play all day and recreation seemed to be the way to go. But I still wanted to know more “stuff.”

I went on to receive a Masters degree in theological studies because I wanted to know more about God. Then I wanted to sing, wanted to play, and I wanted to talk about God to people. It was then that I decided that before I go on any further, I should talk to a friend who is a recreation therapist at Duke University. Did I mention that I gave a presentation at Duke University on Exorcism (‘cause I like talking about the devil too)? While lecturing at Duke, I was asked what I did for a living. I asked people what they thought I did. When finished, someone said I should be a Chaplain because I could play, sing, recreate and listen to people talk about God and his counterpart. The folks at Duke said there was a program in Tampa called Clinical Pastoral Education that “taught” people how to utilize all their gifts. When they finished, one could be a Chaplain. Since I loved to sing and play my guitar in the hospitals, I decided to go on and be a hospital Chaplain.

I have been a Chaplain for nine years. I continue to recreate (do magic tricks at the bedside of patients), play and sing with my guitar, talk about God and anything else related to other relationships. Being a Chaplain has allowed me to share the gifts God has given me in so many ways: by helping an anxious patient begin to relax and find peace; by comforting a dying patient and allowing them to express feelings and fears that they would not even share with their own family; by being the first to begin the closure and healing process of family members who have lost a loved one or friend, sometimes just by taking the time to listen to their story; or by giving a smile and a sympathetic ear to hospital staff who might have personal problems or feel they are overwhelmed or overworked—so many ways that make a difference.

Believe it or not, I get paid for it. It must have rubbed off because my wife is a physical therapist and she is in CPE to become a Chaplain, too. To be all you can be isn’t just for the Army anymore!
In November of 1975 I was hospitalized for surgery. Because of complication I was in the hospital for 3 weeks instead of one week (yes, those were the days when you actually had some time to heal before leaving the hospital for home). The unexpected delay in going home left me feeling frustrated and irritable. It was at that time the chaplain stopped by and I sensed that I could say to her what I feared to say to my friends and family. I shared my fears, concerns and “pity party” feelings.

It was at that moment I sensed a pull on the strings of my heart to become a chaplain. After one unit of CPE I knew that this was where I was to be. But because I am a teacher at heart I knew that I would have to find a way to combine both loves ... teaching and chaplaincy. This led to CPE supervision and so ends my story ... no so began my story.
Bridget Deegan-Krause

In response to the promptings of the Spirit of God, I came to chaplaincy after a search for hospitable places for my ministerial gifts. While serving as a Jesuit Volunteer in a hospice setting, and later during my Master of Divinity studies at Notre Dame, I had the opportunity to be mentored by professional chaplains. I was attracted by the deep satisfaction these chaplains found in their meaningful work. As I worked my way through a beginning unit of CPE and later a year-long paid residency both immensely rich interfaith learning opportunities with terrific supervisors— I was taken by the high levels of professionalism of my chaplain colleagues as well as the structures that supported them in their work — including good pay and strong accountability structures within their institutions and professional organizations (including the NACC). Over the past fifteen years I have developed a rich ministry that includes work in interdisciplinary settings in hospice as well as in academia, working with other professionals preparing for work in health care. My ministry in direct pastoral care has been enhanced by writing, retreat leadership, presentations and teaching, as well as opportunities to preach and preside. As a spouse and mother of two, I have found in chaplaincy, flexibility and opportunities for ongoing formation that complement well my personal life.

And simply put, and very importantly for me, I have found in chaplaincy some of the most well-grounded, professional and spiritually effective ministers of the Church. My chaplain colleagues value with me the need to take our gifts and skills seriously and to hone them and develop them for the healing of God’s people. Despite the restrictions upon sacramental ordination in my denomination, I have found great freedom and abundant opportunities for ministerial leadership within chaplaincy, and now see my chaplain colleagues joining me in the directing of programs and the shaping of institutions. As well I have enjoyed the exciting collegiality of leaders of various denominations and professions.

Perhaps, like me, you too are compelled by the power of Jesus’ healing love. Perhaps, like me, you too are discerning the continued and sometimes surprising movement of the Spirit in your ministry and wonder if God might be calling you in this direction, even for a while. Perhaps, like me, you seek to find places where in the Church you can effectively make a difference, where your vocation and abilities can be recognized and celebrated and used well.

Consider chaplaincy. Get to know the chaplains in your area. Spend time with them and come to understand the rich ministerial opportunities that exist within chaplaincy. Consider taking a unit of CPE - a wonderful learning opportunity and a chance to get to know the profession. Contact the NACC and let one of us who are part of this great group help you consider the steps in a path that may work for you.
The middle aged married woman acknowledged that she had come to the hospital because of terrible migraine headaches just as she had done several weeks before. Tests results indicated that everything was normal. The chaplain had stopped to spend time with her and see how she was doing. He asked her if by chance there were significant events that had occurred in her recent or distant past. It was then that she recalled that her husband had had a stroke and had developed seizures four years ago. Too, she realized with the inquiries of the chaplain, that the headaches that she had had all her life, became migraines four to six years ago. The chaplain wondered with her what her reaction was to her husband’s dramatic change in health. Without blinking she said that she often worried about his health and monitored closely his meds. Then the chaplain surprised the patient by asking her if she could recall when she last took a vacation or actually had some “fun”. The patient thought for a long moment and said that it had been a long time since she had taken a vacation and fun times were such a distant memory. The chaplain who sat across from the patient through out the visit, smiled and said, “Do you think there could be a connection between your health condition and the amount of rest and enjoyment you have in your life?”

After a considerable pause and the slouching of her head, the patient thought and said, “There just may be. I may have to ask my family to help me care for my husband so that I can better care for myself. I probably need to take more time outs and play more bingo.” To which the chaplain only said, “Amen”.

Patients visit hospitals weekly and arrive overwhelmed by dozens of issues. Six of ten visits are stress related. Our chaplains’ time is patients’ time. It is the chaplain who often may assist patients to sort out their lives. The chaplains desire to listen, are trained how to and thus can help the patient listen to the rhythm of their own lives. This then may allow patients in the quiet of their own rooms and upon discharge to better see their own path to a more peaceful and richer life.
Why Did I Become A Chaplain?

The thread began unraveling 21 years ago when my husband was diagnosed with lung cancer and my 21 year old son was nearly killed in a motorcycle accident. He was in a trauma center and had seven surgeries the year his father was dying. I was an R.N. and became acutely aware there was ample support for the physical aspect of trauma and disease but almost none for the psycho-spiritual dimension of our family of five.

With my interest in holistic health as well as spirituality, to carve out a new career after my husbands death seemed like a wise choice. Little did I know, seventeen years after being Board certified, that my now very successful son would once again be in an accident however; this time he only survived three hours. As the doctors were working on him I learned, one at a time, the list of his injuries, and I pleaded with the E.R. to let us see him and advised them please not to put him on any life support machines.

Later I learned that they were amazed with my clarity and direction during such an intense, shocking experience. Of course, I directly credit my ability to stand in the fire and consider what is the most loving action for my son as well as myself and his two younger sisters, was due to my chaplain training, my fifteen years as a Hospice Chaplain and four years of a Centering Prayer practice.

My grief journey is considerably clearer, calmer and more centered than anything I experienced with his fathers death.

What a preparation for life! I am grateful beyond words.
Ellen Radday

I was first certified in 1990 at age 53 and re-certified regularly through 2010. I served as Director of Region IV, which meant also being a member of NACC’s national Board, the NLC, for five years. I served as NACC’s representative on several occasions for the USCCB’s research on lay ministry and its draft statement on women. I was co-chair of NACC’s joint national conference with APC in 2000. I have served many times on certification teams and also as an ITE. Due to a recent health problem, I have had to pull back from these activities although I did serve as an interviewer in Boston in October 2007.

I have lived in the Diocese of Arlington, Virginia, from 1967-1970, 1979-1982 and steadily since 1986. Previously our family accompanied my husband in a variety of overseas postings with the U.S. Information Agency. In 1989 we decided to retire and remain in the U.S., so I was able to pursue what I felt as a call to ministry. Thanks to a series of providential events, I discovered that professional chaplaincy was open to Roman Catholic women and that the requirements were CPE and certification by the NACC. Seeking contemporary theological competence, I also enrolled in a graduate program at the Washington Theological Union. I did this part-time because my elderly mother had come to live with us, and I was recruited for a chaplaincy position in a local, secular, for-profit nursing and rehabilitation center. I was the chaplain there for about 8 years. In addition to spiritual care for residents, family and staff, I developed an internship program as well as a joint ethics committee for several of the company’s nursing homes in our area. Though I had resisted when I was recruited, I came to love the long-term care and rehabilitation environment, where as the chaplain I experienced being a pastor. When the company abruptly discontinued its spiritual care program in 1998, I was free to devote more time to my mother, who died later that same year at age 96. I did not actively seek another position, but once again I was recruited by people I had met during CPE, and began serving as a part-time hospital chaplain in 2001. I resigned in 2005 in order to care for my granddaughter when her widowed mother returned to work.

Hanging over me throughout all of this time was the realization that the local hierarchy did not really affirm or utilize professional ecclesial ministers like myself. Although I had my pastor’s support, I never knew whether the bishop would bestow the ecclesial endorsement required for certification and renewal of certification. I brought this issue up regularly when I was a member of the NLC, proposing that we take seriously the potential for refusal of ecclesial endorsement for lay applicants, even if they complete all of the other requirements for eligibility for certification.

Although I have been sought out by lay persons who have been interested in chaplaincy, in good conscience I could never promote the process required for NACC certification, because I knew it could all be for naught if the bishop chose to withhold his endorsement.

In addition, during all these years (1987-2007) I almost never met anyone outside the NACC venue who has heard of NACC or of lay persons serving as professional chaplains. When I participated in the USCCB research sessions on lay ministry and the role of women in the church, as NACC’s representative, neither the bishops nor the other representatives of lay ministry associations had ever heard of NACC or of lay persons certified
Ellen Radday continued

as chaplains: this, in spite of the fact that we claim we are certified in the name of the bishops. I loved being a chaplain - providing spiritual care, leading religious services, proclaiming the Good News of God’s love for each one of us. Being a chaplain brought together my life experience, my talents, and my faith. I regret retirement but have found a few ways to exercise pastoral ministry.
Father Luke Kalarickal

My Call to Pastoral Care

I am Fr. Luke Kalarickal, belonging to the Congregation of the Missionaries of St. Frances de Sales. Born in India on May 25, 1960, I did my schooling and seminary studies in India. I was ordained a priest on April 23, 1988 in my home parish in the State of Kerala. Besides my Philosophical and Theological studies I also secured Bachelors degree in Art (B.A), Bachelors of Education and Masters in English Literature. As a priest I worked as pastor, associate pastor, Assistant Novice Master, Dean of Studies in our Seminary, teacher in our High School and as the Director of a Home for the Aged. As per the need of the pastoral ministries in USA I was sent by the Order to work in USA in the year 1997. In USA I worked as a Pastor in two parishes in the Diocese of Tyler, TX.

It was while working in St. Boniface church in Chandler, TX, that I got the opportunity to do an extended unity of CPE from Mother Frances Hospital which is only 12 miles away from the parish I was working in. My clinical experiences were not in a hospital at that time: rather it was in a clinic. It was, indeed, quite challenging. But that boosted my spirit in clinical pastoral ministry and enhanced my pastoral conversation. My appointment by the Bishop in the year 2005 as the chaplain to Mother Frances Hospital enabled me to do the CPE Residency program and later to be certified by NACC. My work in the hospital enabled me to enter into the world of the suffering and to have an increased love in ministering to them. Entering into their emotional as well as spiritual world and working with them seem to be quite fulfilling and rewarding. When you see the face of Christ in each of the suffering you forget about yourself. I had a touch of Mother Teresa’s experience. It is also an opportunity to share the joys of the parents of the new born. Thus my Pastoral Care ministry becomes a Scripture based one, namely, “Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep”. Often I find that ‘my presence’ is a wonderful ministry of companionship, comfort and assurance for the lonely patients and the staff.

I now realize that my inborn urge and taste for the pastoral care ministry is being fulfilled today. As a youngster I grew up seeing the sufferings of my mother and of one of my aunts, a religious sister, who was bed-ridden for 28 years due to meningitis. They both were wonderful inspirations for patience, compassion, understanding and accepting suffering in true Christian spirit. More over I myself suffered a lot in my younger days. I had a long lasting eye problem caused by a damage on the cornea. I have traveled with my father many places and hospitals for the treatment. I also had the Rheumatic Fever that affected my active life for a long time. Besides these I had also SMR surgery and another one for tonsils. These sicknesses were responsible for my meetings with many patients, doctors, hospitals, etc. This helped me to enter into a world of sufferings. I began to understand what it is meant by sufferings and pains. I became more and more conscious about how much people look for healing and relieve just as I myself looked for, many times. I wished if I could be a healer and comforter for the sick and the suffering. Since the circumstances didn’t let me I couldn’t materialize my wish. But in the course of time I realized that I could be a spiritual healer to them. That helped me to turn to the life of priesthood. Today I can see that all my experiences were directed to what I am today.
Twelve years ago, after many years of very active ministry as a high school teacher and a campus minister on college campuses, I began to feel the need to “slow down” and take more time for quiet and reflection. Out of “God’s blue” came an invitation to be a pastoral presence with the elder Sisters in my community at Los Gatos, California, the Sisters of the Holy Names. I was told that I could form my own “job description,” which seemed like a very creative opportunity! A very practical aspect that appealed to me was knowing that the older Sisters wouldn’t have a lot of “all nighters” or constant weekend involvements to keep up with!

In a very short time, as I began to get to know these women and listen to their incredible life stories, I “fell in love with them.” I began to appreciate how much I was learning from them about what is really important in life (I was in my mid-50’s), how to “let go” of what used to seem “all important”, how to make more time for “just being” with oneself, others and especially with God. I was delighted how open they were to exploring different ways of praying, along with deepening the more traditional devotions that were a part of their lives. And they wanted to keep on learning, to keep aware of world events, so they could hold these needs in their hearts and their prayer. And the experience of accompanying some of these women on their final journey home to God became a most precious and privileged gift for me. For three years, my life was so enriched by this experience of mutual ministry with elders that I felt called to training for Chaplaincy, to prepare myself more professionally, personally and spiritually for my “next career.”

St. Mary’s Medical Center in San Francisco offered a full year residential program in Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) which I applied for. Our group of eight students was the most fascinating and diverse group I could ever have found: in age (22 - 65), ethnic and cultural background (Nigerian, Chinese, Latino, German and “white Americans), single, married, gay and straight, Catholic and Protestant denominations. We had much to learn from each other (and to learn about ourselves!) as we engaged in the intense process of personal, spiritual and professional growth for Chaplaincy. And we were blessed with experienced and wise mentors to support and accompany us on the way.

In 1997, I completed my training and accepted a position as Chaplain in an Assisted Living and Long-Term Care facility, Providence Mother Joseph Care Center, in Olympia, Washington, where I “honed my skills” and deepened my passion for ministering with elders. In the year 2000, my mother’s health seriously declined and it was time for me to be closer to her in Seattle. God’s Providence led me to another Providence facility, Providence Mount St. Vincent, where I have ministered for the past seven years with elders in assisted living and long-term care. The greatest learning experience of these years was in caring for my Mom every evening and weekend until she died in 2003. Although we loved each other, we had not been “close” or very comfortable with each other in my adult years. Our differences rubbed each other and triggered feelings and reactions that were very painful to deal with for both of us. I needed to go very deeply to heal some past wounds and to face some difficult truths about myself. I needed to “let Mom be herself” (not just “my mother”) and to accept and love myself with all my shortcomings and “messiness.” Only walking the walk with my mother could have opened me to the grace God most wanted to give me: letting go of “perfectionism” and unreal exceptions, appreciating the “gift that is.” That gift and grace has continued to profoundly shape my continuing ministry of sharing life with elders: participating in the mystery of life with its daily joys, sufferings and “dyings,” all preparing us for the ultimate surrender to God to be embraced by Love forever.
Marty Folan

He lay flat on his back, unconscious, on the road.

An off-duty nurse rushed to his side, time was of the essence.

She called. An ambulance arrived.

Doctors in ER united to administer treatment.

A chaplain, nurse and doctor explained to his family the heart wrenching details of the accident.

Compassion. Care. Love. Still, something more was needed.

A miracle.

Time alone wouldn’t heal his wounds, couldn’t restore his shattered soul.

Only the love of God poured out through the medical team, hospital employees, and every individual who sought to comfort him would restore his life.

And it did. I was him.

And I came back whole, to help others heal, to listen, to pray, to comfort.

To share with others the love of God that was given to me. To be part of an awesome miracle that others were for me.

I was once a helpless victim. I am now a hospital chaplain.

I am Marty Folan.
Kathy Kacmare

My Path to Chaplaincy

Seventeen years ago, after almost 25 years of working as a hairdresser, I was led in a completely different direction after praying at length about my future. I had reached a point in my life when it was evident that I needed a change, and yet I had no idea of how or which way to go. I began to pray, along with my spiritual director, for guidance and direction, very often with uncertainty and fear as to what the path might be.

Up until then, I had mainly been involved in being a Eucharistic Minister, visiting the sick and elderly of our parish, and working with Cursillo. While attending a seminar for persons dealing with grief and loss, I came across an application for a “Clinical Pastoral Education” program at our Medical Center in Little Rock, AR. It sounded interesting, but I did not feel that I would have the qualifications needed. Still, the message kept coming to me that “God does not call the qualified, but He qualifies the called”. After the application kept reappearing on my desk, I decided to investigate.

To my surprise, even though I was not an ordained minister, had no college degree, but did have many years experience being with people, I was encouraged to apply for a unit of CPE, and was accepted in 1989. This began an incredible journey that, I know, was inspired by God for the rest of my life. After finishing 5 units of CPE, I had the assurance that we are all called to minister to one another, and along with learning much about other people and dealing with crisis situations, I came to understand so much more about myself, and my relationship with God.

One of the recurring questions that was posed to me by my supervisors was “What do you intend to do with this education?” I recognized that I was following a path which had no guarantees, yet I was convinced that this was what I was meant to do. My idea was that I would do something within the Catholic Church, but I soon realized that there was another plan at work. After finding that there would be no place for me to serve in the Church, I was very disappointed, but then doors began to open into hospital ministry. Since I live in a state where we have only 4% Catholics, I became very adept in ministering to persons of all faith traditions.

I have been privileged to work as a Staff Chaplain, a Director of Pastoral Care, a Hospice Chaplain, Bereavement Counselor, and currently am working in a Presbyterian Retirement Community with a full continuum of care. I have also helped bring Stephen Ministry to several parishes here. Each of these positions literally “came to me”, and have been a great opportunity to minister to God’s people. I count it as such a gift, to be able to walk alongside persons in their daily lives, and help them find meaning and peace.

This journey has not always been easy, and the next step was not always evident, but God continues to lead me. The journey continues to this day, as I try to remain open to the Holy Spirit’s lead. Though MY IDEA of where this would lead did not necessarily work out, the path for my ministry has been rich, and filled with many blessings.

I look forward to whatever the future holds ...
Tom Rowan

My story of working with the sick and dying began in 1990 while I was a Maryknoll Lay Missioner serving in Sao Paulo, Brazil with my wife and our two sons. I was involved in a Church pastoral called ‘Projeto Esperança’ or ‘Project Hope’ that cared for persons who were HIV+. I did this ministry for about 2 ½ years until we left Brazil to come home. The ministry was visiting the patients assigned to me, listening to their stories, and talking to them about their physical condition and often, their spiritual condition.

Upon returning to the states, I was elected to leadership of the lay missioners for two 3 year terms. At the end of that, I felt called to pastoral ministry and started with an extended CPE unit. I was assigned to a major New York hospital to cover an HIV unit, 2 detox, and a 28 day recovery unit. Since it was extended, I was only there twice a week. I felt I needed more time with the patients. As this unit was ending, I applied to Calvary Hospital in the Bronx for a CPE Residency Program. This was a full year course and had all the features of a CPE Program. Supervision was excellent in both settings. I learned a lot about myself and what I was feeling and how to relate to patients.

I got my first job in 2002, was laid off in 2005, hired in 2006, resigned in 2008, and stated a new position where I currently am. My field of interest has been the care of the elderly. The stories of the elderly are deep and profound. I met elderly persons in the hospital who only ‘wanted to go home’. And now, I am working with community houses of worship to set up programs to provide spiritual care and emotional support to homebound elderly.

I feel that chaplaincy like the mission has an element of call with it, certain grace for the journey, and gratitude to serve the Church in its healing ministry in this way.

Tom Rowan BCC’02
Reverend Pamela Cicioni

A Day in the life of a Chaplain Mercy Health System - NWA

It started, as always, as I entered the front doors of the hospital repeating of the words “So by the Grace of God go I”. And my day of Chaplaincy began ... .

Let me say ... Chaplains are seen wandering the halls and stopping to talk, we are seen having a cup of coffee with someone in a quiet corner, we are by the side of patients each and every day and we are present as a vital part of the Hospital team in emergencies, surgeries, and death ... "So by the Grace of God GO WE ...”We must evoke a gentle presence of calm in the midst of moments of fear and trauma. We listen diligently to the difficult words that come as people try to explain their deepest thoughts. By our nature and our Presence, we represent the Presence of God, of Spirit, of Hope ... many times not by words or scripture or prayers, many times it’s just in presence.

So on this day, I’m first greeted by a man who is waiting for me 6:30 am, who has brought his neighbor in for emergency ... patient is now having heart cath done ... wife is at home with Alzheimers ... "what should I do now?” he asks... and my day begins.

Soon, a staff member walks up to me and says “I don’t want to live anymore” ... we go and talk ... her husband of many years has died of cancer ... .

As I began rounding the patients are preparing for surgery and this patient, surrounded by his family says “Chaplain Pamela, you’ve been with me many a time and I don’t know if it’s worth it to keep fighting ... I’m tired” ... so I sit down ... .

So on I remember to check with staff who has just had biopsy for possible recurring cancer and he speaks of this day and what we know and of future and what might be ... hard ... important for him to have a safe place to just be ... he asks as I leave “please find me before you leave because I’ll have news ... find me!”

Then the day moves on with young adult emergency surgery ... surrounded by peers after surgery ... beautiful sight, friends and family! Sick children ... weary parents ... yet babies getting better ... slowly, slowly ... the day marches on ... .

Then as I close my door to go home... a staff member comes running ... “Pamela, my house is on fire ... come with me” ... we arrive as the flames are being doused and the house is destroyed ... The Rogers Fire Department and Prairie Creek Fire Team: as able, approached and greet us with compassion and they were glad to see me, because we walk side by side almost everyday in Mercy’s ER ... I stay by her side, the Chief tells us of the death of the three children’s pets, of the loss of most everything. We wait for husband and children to arrive; one by one ... teams begin to gather “what can we do?” ... I stay by her side and with each approach of family seeing the reality of loss ... we relive our beginning moments. Then when I feel comfortable ... I walk away because all are in good hands. As I drive away, my eyes fill with tears for I saw a horrific sight that then reminded me
Reverend Pamela Cicioni, continued

of last week’s fire which I worked. The woman in the house fire and her husband died, then I remembered and remembered ... and I drove towards my empty hundred year old farm house in the historic district and I was shaking ... so I turned on 1st street and about 6:30p.m. I stood looking at the great big doors of Fire Station One. Just as I step out unto the street one of those great big doors opened and a huge fire truck pulled out slowly, no flashing lights on, and the truck approached me. The driver looked down and said “Pamela what are you doing?” ... and I asked “are you going to another fire?” “No. Pamela, what’s going on?”

I couldn’t talk and I remember just holding on to the door handle of the truck looking up to him and then the other fire men jumped down and the Lieutenant came around gave me a hug and said “Back it up boys” and he took me inside and the others joined in ... we sat and talked about what we had just experienced, for they too had worked the fire...then each of them began recalling events they worked with me over the last 4 weeks and we counted 7 huge traumas and then one man said ... “Pamela ... I was there when your momma died in your parents’ house fire 12 years ago ...”

I just turned onto 1st Street ... because “So by the grace of God go I” and in those cherished moments with those firemen we shared deeply each of our thoughts about moments we’ve all had ... it was good for all of us last night. In that quiet fire station ...

And when we gave our hugs and said goodnight, I asked “where were you heading out to?” and one of the guys said, “we were heading to a meeting”. The Lieutenant quickly said “this time has been more important than any meeting tonight!"
My introduction to chaplaincy came many years ago at the hands of a chaplain whose name I have long ago forgotten. While serving as a parish youth minister I traveled with my fiancé to visit a friend of hers who worked at St. Anthony Hospital in Carroll, Iowa. Her friend introduced me to one of their chaplains, and she opened a new door that I didn’t know existed.

I had gone to college with the intention of becoming a physician. For me it was the result of a long-standing call I felt from God to heal others.

Throughout my undergraduate years I also volunteered in our parish’s youth ministry program. Through much discussion and discernment, I discovered that there was more than one kind of healing, and decided that ministry to others was to be my life’s vocation. It wasn’t until I met the chaplain that I realized that there existed a way to bring together my interests in both health care and ministry. I also knew myself well enough to know that I was not ready at that time for this step.

Several years later I was the program director of a small retreat center and finishing up graduate school. Our long range plan was for me to pursue chaplaincy training when our four small children had grown. God had other plans. The religious community that sponsored the retreat center decided to close it the month after I completed my Masters degree. Suddenly facing unemployment in a very tight job market for ministry, I was strongly encouraged by two CPE Supervisors in our community, who thought I had potential to be a good chaplain, to enter CPE. Neither knew of my future interest in this career path, a fact I attributed to divine intervention.

It was very late in the summer when I contacted several residency programs in the Twin Cities of Minnesota. All of the residency slots in the Cities for that fall were filled except for one. I hurriedly completed and sent in the CPE application, secured both an interview and the residency position. The Supervisors took a chance on me even though I had not completed the required previous unit of CPE. I struggled a bit at first like most new CPE students but I knew within that first unit that chaplaincy was the place for me.

I consider it an incredible blessing to be allowed to be present to people when they are at their most vulnerable. For me the image of Jesus walking with the disciples along the road to Emmaus has had special resonance. In those times there are moments of profound sadness and joy, fear and peace, deep longing and quiet acceptance. I received much more from the patients and residents than I can possibly give. I have worked in many settings over the course of 30 years in ministry and I can’t think of a more rewarding calling than being a chaplain.