



Catherine Thompson brings cheer to a patient in Oakville

## Bringing Christ's Presence to Difficult Situations

Some insights into those who minister to people outside the reach of the church

BY CATHERINE THOMPSON

A question we commonly ask one another when getting acquainted is, “What do you do?” When I tell people I am a hospital chaplain, most just say “Oh” and never inquire further. As a friend recently put it, saying you are a chaplain can be a ‘party buster,’ like saying you work at a funeral home. There is old, deeply engrained, stereotypical thinking about chaplaincy, and I sometimes encounter it while visiting patients in the hospital.

The look of concern that comes over people’s faces when I introduce myself as the chaplain tells it all. Some are bold enough to verbalize what their face has already revealed. “Is there something I don’t know?” or “Am I dying?” Another response I encounter is the perception that the chaplain is there to ‘push religion’—not.

To help clarify matters, here are three of the most frequently asked questions about chaplaincy ministry and my brief responses. For additional information, please see the sidebar at the end of this article.

### WHAT IS A CHAPLAIN?

A chaplain is typically a religious or spiritual leader such as a priest, pastor, rabbi, imam, etc., ministering to people outside of the ‘church’ who either don’t have a religious affiliation or are unable to attend a place of worship for various reasons such as health, confinement, military duties, etc. If churches were the blood vessels in a body, then chaplains would be the lymph system that reaches all the other parts of the body that blood vessels don’t reach.

Though ‘chaplain’ was originally a Christian term, it now applies to people in other religions filling the same role. While there are some chaplains who remain denominational in their ministry, the majority of institutional chaplains are required to function in a multi-faith manner, meaning they are responsible for the spiritual and religious care of people of all faith groups.

How does a Christian chaplain do that? When possible, working collaboratively with clergy of



Rev. Bruce Rushton, Chaplain,  
Emergency Services, Vancouver

## ASSOCIATION OF ALLIANCE CHAPLAINS

Since 1995, the C&MA has had an Association of Alliance Chaplains which is supported by the National Ministry Centre and District Offices. Those working in chaplaincy automatically become a member of the Association, which now has 55 members and is growing and changing to better support its chaplains.

non-Christian religions, engaging all people with the love of Christ, accepting our limits and trusting God's limitlessness.

### WHAT DO CHAPLAINS DO?

It is difficult to explain exactly what a chaplain does because the role and scope of duties are very diverse depending on the context in which they work. Even among chaplains, although they share things in common, there are a number of differences. For example, it is difficult for a military chaplain to fully understand the world of a nursing home chaplain.

That being said, some common duties of chaplains would include leading worship, funeral and memorial services; officiating at weddings and baptisms; providing spiritual and life counsel; providing emotional support for those in crisis and those who are hurting, grieving, lonely, frightened, confused, etc.; being a trustworthy presence in the secular workplace; being an ambassador for Christ; providing resources; being a moral voice; advocating; and responding to needs as an opportunity for ministry and witness.

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Although chaplains may not be able to openly evangelize or proselytize in the workplace, it is possible to model Christ in all that we say and do and to love our neighbours as ourselves. Our God of grace does provide opportunities to speak about Christ to those ready and needing to hear, so it is not as limiting as some may think.

### HOW DOES ONE BECOME A CHAPLAIN?

There are vocational chaplains (professional career chaplains) and those who volunteer in chaplaincy positions.

Those interested in becoming a career chaplain would typically require a Masters degree in theology, training appropriate to the institution's standards, relevant pastoral experience, and Official Worker licensing and endorsement as a chaplain with The Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada (C&MA). Ordination is not always required to become a chaplain.

In later years, many non-ordained people have received professional training in chaplaincy and work as chaplains in schools, hospitals, prisons, the corporate sector, military, nursing homes, hostels, Emergency Response Services, outreach centres, and much more.

A growing number of Alliance pastors are volunteering as part-time chaplains with their local police and fire departments, nursing homes, or veterans' organizations.

For those who have a compassionate heart and want to support others without going through all the requirements stated above, many institutions such as hospitals, nursing homes, hospices, hostels, corrections, etc. are open to volunteers. ☞

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#### FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

If you are interested in learning more about chaplaincy ministry or have specific questions, please contact Catherine Thompson, the National Coordinator of the Association of Alliance Chaplains at [cthompson@haltonhealthcare.on.ca](mailto:cthompson@haltonhealthcare.on.ca) or 905-845-2571 ext. 6767 and/or your Alliance District Office.