

# TRAINING SPIRITUAL CARE VOLUNTEERS

*An Indiana Program Teaches Participants How to Help People Caught in Crisis*

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In 2000 the chaplains at Saint John's Health System, Anderson, IN, responding to a need to train community members as caregivers, launched what we call the Ministers of Care training program. Our program equips laypeople to serve as spiritual care volunteers in area church parishes, hospitals, and hospice programs. Since it began, Ministers of Care has trained 136 people, including 33 who have served as volunteers at Saint John's.

## WHAT DOES THE PROGRAM DO?

Volunteers often express frustration at their lack of preparation in caring for suffering people. "I didn't want to say or do the wrong thing, so I didn't do anything," they often say. Sometimes volunteers' own theological misconceptions make their caregiving ineffective. For example, they may have been told that illness is the result of sin, or that a failure to heal is the result of insufficient faith, or that God "wills" us to suffer and die. The Ministers of Care training program gives caregivers an opportunity to examine the belief and value systems that inform their caregiving practices.

Not only do volunteer caregivers often struggle with what to say; they also sometimes say things that hurt rather than help. As a result, some people who have gone through medical crises report a lack of sensitivity to their thoughts and feelings on the part of their caregivers. Here are some examples:

- After a miscarriage, a young couple was told, "It will be okay. You are young and can have another baby."
- A woman put off grieving for a baby she had lost in a miscarriage until she was in her 70s; she had failed to grieve at the time of the miscarriage, partly because her caregivers never acknowledged

the baby's death as a great loss.

- A well-meaning caregiver told a family member, after the death of a loved one, that "God needed her more than you did."

Ministers of Care is a program that gives volunteers skills that increase their confidence in their ability to relate to people caught in crises. Our program also helps participants who have themselves experienced ineffective care during a time of crisis. The curriculum is designed to raise participants' level of self-awareness, equip them with ministering skills, and give them a sense of purpose.

Because program participants come from diverse backgrounds—they vary greatly in terms of age, religion, culture, spiritual leanings, education, income, and experience—they automatically make the Ministers of Care classroom ecumenical. Our program endorses no particular set of religious beliefs, practices, attitudes, or sentiments. Rather, it focuses upon spirituality, which we define as "personal views and behaviors that express a sense of relatedness to the transcendental dimension, or God."

A primary program goal is fostering a sense of spiritual well-being in both the participant and in those who will receive the participant's care. We define spiritual well-being as "a sense of harmonious interconnectedness with self, others, and God."

## THE PROGRAM'S 10 SESSIONS

Ministers of Care is a 35-hour program that is spread over 10 weeks. Tuition is free. The program's costs are currently borne by Saint John's Health System's Center for Spiritual Care.

To encourage spirituality, we begin each session with a period of spiritual reflection intended to help participants connect (or perhaps recon-

nect) with whatever is sacred to them, as well as to center them on the topic at hand in the session. At the end of each session, we offer a closing ritual or reflection to help bring a sense of closure to the discussion and to give participants a sense of purpose or mission.

Each session has three objectives:

- Raising self-awareness
- Teaching skills
- Promoting a sense of mission or purpose

We ask participants to evaluate each session.

These evaluations help staff members understand how effective each session has been in accomplishing program goals and guide their planning for future sessions.

**Session One** The program's first session lasts 12 hours and is spent in a retreat setting. In this session, participants undergo a Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, a personality assessment tool. Following the personality assessment, they participate in group exercises that help them increase their self-awareness. Finally, they study the difference between religion and spirituality.

**Sessions Two through Six** The next five sessions occur weekly and are each two and a half hours in length. In them, session facilitators discuss models of pastoral care and their various aspects, including making hospital and home visits, developing empathy, counseling in situations that involve grief and loss, and dealing with life's crises.

**Sessions Seven and Eight** The next two sessions are intended to move participants beyond a focus on themselves and their faith communities and toward an awareness of the resources—including social service agencies—available in their broader communities. Session Seven focuses on mental health issues and services and on hospice. In Session Eight, participants report back to the class on what they have learned about a particular agency and the services that agency provides.

**Session Nine** Self-care and a sense of one's own "boundaries" are important to a caregiver's well-being and effectiveness. Accordingly, Session Nine asks participants to take an inventory developed by Charles L. Whitfield, MD, to help them assess the strengths or weaknesses of their boundaries.<sup>1</sup> Such knowledge is vital because caregivers must develop a firm sense of their boundaries if they are to protect themselves from stress and possible burnout.

**Session 10** The 10th and final session gives each participant an opportunity to demonstrate how

he or she has integrated the lessons of the previous nine weeks into his or her life. Toward this end, each participant is asked to create something—an essay, poem, song, or piece of art—that illustrates what he or she saw as a key lesson of the program. This session is entitled "Presence, Process, and Journey: Putting It All Together."

We hold a worship service on the Friday evening following the last session. Program participants invite their pastors, family members, and friends to attend. During the service, the pastors anoint the participants' hands, thereby commissioning them for ministry. A reception after the service gives participants an opportunity to meet each other's family members and share in the joy of the new relationships formed during the program. This service both celebrates the lessons the participants have learned and sends them forth to serve.

### PRESERVING CORE VALUES

Three months after the program's conclusion, the participants gather again to evaluate what they learned from it and to continue networking. In addition, we provide an annual two-and-a-half hour educational program for all alumni. In it, alumni receive further training in related issues, such as crisis intervention (taught by psychologists who served in New York City and Washington, DC, after September 11, 2001), storytelling as it relates to spiritual caregiving, and family systems theory.

Ministers of Care alumni have gone on to become Eucharistic ministers and deacons in their congregations, clinical pastoral education students, and seminary students. We who serve the program believe that it demonstrates Saint John's dedication to holistic care and to vital core values: respect for the dignity of all people, service, and social justice. ■

*For more information, contact the Center for Spiritual Care, Saint John's Health System, 2015 Jackson St., Anderson, IN 46016.*

### NOTE

1. Charles L. Whitfield, *Boundaries and Relationships: Knowing, Protecting and Enjoying the Self*, Health Communications, Deerfield Beach, FL, 1993. The inventory is in the chapter called "Checking My Boundaries."

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

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