



“Blessed
who

*Dr. Virgil Fry (76) of
Houston's Lifeline Chaplaincy*

ANGELS of HOPE

Houston's Lifeline Chaplaincy provides listening ears and helping hands to patients and families grappling with health issues.

BY DEANA NALL

is he
has regard for the weak..." Psalm 41:1

Allen and Kathy Read never dreamed they would need a lifeline.

Married 42 years, the Baytown couple had raised two children and three foster children and were enjoying their grandchildren. But in May 2002, Allen underwent a simple hernia repair that revealed the unthinkable. He had cancer.

The Reads numbly entered the world of M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston as Allen faced more tests, and they both faced a dreadful reality – he had only a short time to live.

But the Reads were not alone. Lifeline Chaplaincy was there.

"They made almost daily visits while we were there," Kathy remembers. "They prayed for our spiritual and physical well being, brought communion to us and answered any questions we had about the different processes of hospital life."

Allen died Aug. 1, two months after his diagnosis.

"Within 10 minutes or so, two Lifeline chaplains were with us, to sustain us while we spent our last minutes with the one we loved," Kathy says.

Lifeline ministers to people like the Reads every day, offering a hand of compassion to families in times of medical crisis and grief.

"Our room was always filled with our physical and spiritual family," Kathy says. "I can only imagine the isolation a family far from home feels at such a time."

A visit to Lifeline Chaplaincy reveals, on the surface, a small team of people quietly carrying out their ministry. But spend some time with Dr. Virgil Fry ('76), Paul Riddle ('82), Barry Curtis or any of the volunteers as they discuss their passion and motivation for ministering to people in their darkest hours.

Talk to Rosa Winfrey about the thousands of people assisted every year by Lifeline's

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Compassionate Touch ministry. Ask the university interns why they choose to spend their summers in the Texas Medical Center.

You will find the Lifeline staff and volunteers to be nothing less than a group of warriors – warriors of prayer and peace who stand daily with those staring death in the face.

“It’s a place of hope,” says Fry, who has served as Lifeline’s executive director since 1985.

On any given day, Lifeline chaplains and volunteers take this message of hope into the 14 hospitals that compose the Texas Medical Center. From January

meets their spiritual needs is really something.”

Bob and his wife, Kay, know how important a spiritual support system can be when a family member is facing serious illness. Their daughter, Fran Onstead Washburn, was diagnosed with cancer at the age of 16 and passed away three-and-a-half years later. At the time, Churches of Christ did not have a formal chaplaincy program in place.

“We had support from our own congregation,” Bob says. “But many

Lifeline has become more effective since the organization moved to Southmore Boulevard in May 2002 from its previous 17-year location at Southwest Central Church of Christ in Houston. Now just a mile-and-a-half north of the Medical Center in the former Texas State Teachers Association building, the larger facility has helped expand Lifeline’s ministries.

“It’s given us a presentable home,” Riddle says.

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M.D. Anderson Cancer Center patient Jerry Rucker of Arkansas prays with Lifeline Chaplaincy executive director Virgil Fry and Jerry's wife, Lou. Jerry has been a patient at the hospital for several months.



through March 2003 alone, Lifeline representatives made 2,892 visits to patients, their families and hospital staff members.

“Each one of those people has a story,” says Riddle, a Lifeline chaplain who oversees the ministry’s 22 volunteers. “There’s a drama going on in each one of those lives.”

Much of the stress that accompanies a medical crisis comes from the patients’ non-medical needs.

“A lot of people who come to the Texas Medical Center – especially those from out of state or the United States – come without their families,” says Robert Onstead, a member of Lifeline’s board of directors and an ACU trustee. “To have someone who cares for them and

people who come to the Medical Center don’t have that support.”

This is where Lifeline comes in.

It is notified when patients list the Church of Christ as their religious affiliation. Medical Center rules prohibit faith-based chaplaincy programs from ministering to patients outside their fellowships, but Lifeline can visit non-Church of Christ patients who have been referred to the organization. In addition to offering spiritual support, Lifeline chaplains and volunteers help families get acquainted with the sprawling Medical Center and answer questions about hospital procedures that can seem overwhelming.

“But underneath all of that, we’re their faith community connection,” Fry says.

The building provides more office space for Fry, Riddle, director of ministries Curtis, administrative assistant Winfrey, business manager Ann Fregia and director of development Carson Stevens.

The facility of almost 7,000 square feet has been named in honor of the late Homer Gainer, a former ACU trustee. Homer and Betty Gainer always believed in Lifeline’s mission, and Betty has continued supporting it since Homer’s death to cancer in March 2002.

“We were always glad to be supportive of Lifeline,” Betty says.

Chaplains host training seminars in the Bill and Deanna Love Conference Center that seats 100. Staff members work more efficiently in their larger offices. The university interns who spend their summers at Lifeline now have their own space to work. The building also offers

space for patient support groups, crisis ministry, educational outreach, a library, study area and courtyard.

And Compassionate Touch, the benevolent side of Lifeline's ministry, is more accessible to the people who need it.

"The new building has allowed Compassionate Touch to blossom," Fry says. "We have to cap how much we help everybody, but it's really enabled us to assist a lot of people."

Hospital social workers calling Lifeline in need of the services of Compassionate Touch are greeted by the voice of Rosa (pronounced "Rosay") Winfrey.

"She has a tremendous reputation with the social workers at all the hospitals," Riddle says. Started in 1997 by Dr. Bill Love ('60), Lifeline's first director of development, Compassionate Touch helps meet the non-medical needs of Medical Center patients and their families. Winfrey processes these requests, and she can provide assistance with parking, meals, lodging, transportation and other needs patients and their families might have during their stay at the Medical Center. And this ministry is not limited to members of Churches of Christ.

"Compassionate Touch not only helps but provides a touch to let them know we're here," Winfrey says.

For Winfrey, helping others through Compassionate Touch is more than a job. "I love it," she says. "It's like God placed me here."

Winfrey knows firsthand how unmet non-medical needs can compound the already-overwhelming stress of having a serious illness. Seven years ago, while undergoing

radiation treatment for breast cancer at Houston's LBJ Hospital, Winfrey found herself in a bind. Most of what little money she had went toward her rent, which left her unable to pay for other necessities – such as food.

"I would go to the hospital lunchroom and get whatever I could with the money I had," she says.

Winfrey's predicament is something thousands of families face in the Medical Center every year. Many patients undergoing extended treatment cannot afford lodging, parking or food.

But Compassionate Touch is making a difference. In 2002, the ministry assisted 1,272 patients with \$182,353 worth of non-medical needs.

"Each month it amazes me how much assistance we provide," Winfrey says. "We are a small organization, but we help in a big way."

Supported by some individuals and congregations but mostly by donations from corporations and foundations, Compassionate Touch is unable to assist everyone who needs help. And the economic aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001, left some corporations unable to continue supporting the ministry.

"We're always looking for more support," Winfrey says. "The hardest thing to do is turn somebody down when they need help."

The rest of Lifeline's operations are supported by 25 Church of Christ congregations and individuals who are mostly, but not exclusively, members of Churches of Christ.

Tracking all the ways Lifeline helps families facing a medical crisis would be impossible. Some people just feel better having a chaplain in

the room, while others need guidance as they wrestle with the difficult questions about death and God's will.

Sherita James ('03) served as a Lifeline intern last summer with fellow ACU students Herbert Buckner ('03), Natalie Dunn ('03) and Colt McCook ('03). James often found herself at bedsides of patients whose families had decided to disconnect life support.

"Generally, they were not looking for any magic answers to the 'why' question; rather they wanted someone to listen to them tell their story of their loved one," says James, a youth and family ministry major from Dallas. "Also, there were times when I had to try and answer tough theological questions. I attempted to mirror their feelings and honestly tell them that

sometimes we will never know why."

These questions – and working with children – were some of James' biggest challenges during her internship.

Establishing limits and boundaries is one of the most significant components of chaplaincy training, Fry says.

"You never know what you are going to walk in on," he says.

To meet this need, Lifeline offers training workshops to help men and women become more proficient when ministering to the seriously ill. Fry also teaches short courses on crisis and grief ministry at ACU and Pepperdine University through the schools' graduate religion programs.

"They're academically based, but it really gets down to the hands-on, day-to-day things ministers have to deal with," Fry says.

Medical chaplaincy education, which ministry training programs have traditionally lacked, is something anyone entering a ministry field needs, says Fry, who remembered the first time he was asked to preach a funeral as a young associate minister.

"Nobody told me how to do that," he says.

Buckner, one of last summer's interns, says his experience at Lifeline will be invaluable to him as a minister.

"Hospital visits, death, dying and pain are all parts of ministry with which I will have to work," says Buckner, a senior Christian ministry major from Houston.

McCook, another intern, sought an experience that would stretch his faith.

"Lifeline definitely fits that description," says McCook, a senior youth and family minister from Post.

"I plan to enter the ministry either as a youth minister or preacher, and I believe my experiences at Lifeline have equipped me for the years ahead in ways I cannot express with words," he says. "I believe the experience of visiting the sick continues to shape me into the image of my lord and savior Jesus Christ, who says, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.'"

Historically, Churches of Christ have shied away from formal chaplaincy ministries because of the faith group's theological identity, Fry says.

"I think we're expanding our view of what the church is all about," he says. "It's not just about worshipping the right way, but it's taking care of each other and other people."

Although an organized, extensive medical chaplaincy program in the Churches of Christ is a relatively new concept, some members have been making efforts on their own to minister to hospital patients and their families for years.

One of the earliest known medical chaplains in the Churches of Christ was J. Woodie Holden ('34), who began his ministry during World War II at Camp Barkeley near Abilene.

"My dad served soldiers in the hospital at Camp Barkeley and also preached at a church on the base," says Holden's son, Dwayne Holden.



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Marie Banister's pillow ministry inspired the vision for Lifeline's medical chaplaincy program.

Holden often went out of his way to help the soldiers and their families. He once invited the out-of-state wife of a soldier being transferred overseas to stay at the Holden's home. After the soldier left, Holden took the soldier's wife and their infant son to the train station. When Holden returned home, he realized the wife had left behind a baby bottle.

"He drove to the next town and beat the train to return it to her," says Dwayne ('66).

After the war, Holden preached in the Fort Worth area until 1961, when he decided to enter medical chaplaincy full time.

"He did it because he loved the work," Fry says. "It became his vocation because he saw the need for it."

Right up until his death in 1987, Holden – supported by Fort Worth-area Churches of Christ – visited hospitalized members of the Church of Christ and others. After his death, the State of Texas honored him by declaring a day in his honor and presenting awards to his family.

A *Christian Journal* article about Holden's ministry, published in September 1970, included this comment about his work: "There are daily opportunities to teach, to encourage the faint-hearted, to support the weak, to build good will for the cause of Christ."

Marie Banister, a member of Southwest Central Church of Christ in Houston in 1968, recognized this need as she visited patients as a volunteer in the Texas Medical Center. That year, she began making pillows to deliver to the patients she met while visiting in the children's ward of M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. As she became known as "the pillow

lady," Banister realized she couldn't continue her ministry alone. She solicited help from women in Houston-area Churches of Christ, and a group began meeting to sew pillows.

Betty Gainer was one of the volunteers.

"It was a nice little seed with us that kept growing and growing into what it is today," Gainer says.

As the pillow ministry expanded, and as Banister continued her hospital visitation, she recognized the need for a full-time chaplain. She approached the elders at Southwest Central and shared her vision of a medical chaplaincy ministry. The elders formed a board of directors that included representatives from other congregations. Then the board began planning a chaplaincy program and consulted many resources, including cancer survivor Randy Becton ('71).

"Randy was brought in as a resource person to advise the churches that were forming this ministry," Fry says.

Lerrill White ('70), assistant director of Clinical Pastoral Education at St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital in the Texas Medical Center, also met with the board while Lifeline was still in the planning stage.

"It has been my pleasure to closely follow its evolution, no matter where I was living, and to get to know the chaplains and their ministry at TMC," says White, who continues to work with Lifeline by teaching the ministry's interns and providing training. "It feels like I have come full circle in this relationship, and I'm pleased to have played even a very small part."

Lifeline began in 1983, originally under the name "Church of Christ Medical Center Chaplaincy." Fry was hired as executive director

Three who weep with those who weep

"Art Linkletter showed us how kids say the darndest things," says **R. Wayne Willis** ('64), director of pastoral care for Norton Healthcare in Louisville, Ky. "My book illustrates how kids say the theologically profoundest things."

Willis' book, "P.S. God, Can You Fly?" (John Knox Press) is a collection of 30 children's prayers found written on index cards in the chapels of Norton and Kosair children's hospitals in Louisville. Willis, who authored commentaries to accompany each of the prayers, wrote the book from a conviction that good, healthy, pristine theology can be learned from children.

"They are purer in heart than we are and closer to God," he says.

Willis should know. Supervising staff chaplains and providing pastoral care to patients, families and staff of six hospitals has given Willis insight into some of life's darkest hours.

"The heart and soul of hospital chaplaincy is being with people in their ultimate moments, their

*"My mom is die. Why.
Do God love me. I love my mother
very very much. I pray for her.
I call God for help but she die."*

– A child's prayer from "P.S. God, Can You Fly?"

'dark night of the soul,'" Willis says. "You have the opportunity to help make it a little less awful, to be someone they can lean on and trust, and even someone who helps them make some meaning out of their spiritual crisis."

After earning a bachelor's in Greek and a master's in church history from ACU, Willis went on to obtain an M.Div. from Vanderbilt University. Near the end of his third degree, a colleague suggested looking into the ministry of medical chaplaincy.

"Hospital chaplaincy sounded like a career where I could do something consistent with my education, something worthwhile and maybe even have a long career," Willis says. "I've had a wonderful career and a wonderful life."

Having taken his first CPE in 1969 (Clinical Pastoral Education, formal training to be a hospital chaplain), Willis was not aware of any CPE hospital chaplains in the Church of Christ. Now a member of the Presbyterian Church, Willis values the knowledge he gleaned from his time as an undergraduate and graduate student at ACU.

"How do Greek and church history help in hospital chaplaincy? At first blush, not much. They seem almost totally irrelevant," he says. "On second glance, they help make you a deeper, broader, multi-dimensional person, and that is always a big plus in life."

Lerrill White ('70), assistant director of Clinical Pastoral Education at St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital in Houston's Texas Medical Center, has learned to find rays of hope in his ministry.

For the past three years, White has planned, implemented and carried out educational programs for the development of ministers, chaplains and ACEP supervisors. The program, which includes 10 summer interns, seven year-long residents, one supervisor-in-training, and six part-time interns, has the responsibility of providing pastoral care to St. Luke's and Texas Children's hospitals – 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In his position for three years, and having served as a chaplain for 29 years, White is keenly familiar with the heartbreaks and triumphs that occur every day in his hospitals.

"If I am a compassionate caregiver, I will weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice," he says. "I give a piece of myself away each time I enter into a caring relationship. It is a costly business, emotionally and spiritually."

While an undergraduate at ACU, White was unaware that full-time hospital chaplains even existed. His senior year, he decided to study pastoral care and counseling.

"I had to talk Dr. Carl Spain and Dr. Thomas Olbricht into helping me implement such a curriculum for the independent studies portion of my master's program," he says.

Several years later, when White enrolled in an introduction course to Clinical Pastoral Education



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Lifeline's motto ("Hand in hand we put the pieces in place") is prominent in administrative assistant Rosa Winfrey's office.

in 1985, and Lifeline remained in the Southwest Central building until the facility on Southmore Boulevard was purchased last spring.

As Lifeline continued to grow, so did the pillow ministry. The first time the women met, they made 36 pillows. Lifeline included the pillow ministry as one of its own. In the years since, volunteers from Churches of Christ all over Houston have made 45,000 pillows – and they're still sewing.

The fruits of these volunteers' efforts are tucked away in a closet in the heart of Lifeline's building, where they wait to be taken to patients by volunteers. And the women don't stop at pillows. In what is now called the Marie Banister Pillow Room, shelves are piled with bags, teddy bears, lap robes, and stockings and hats for cancer patients who have lost their hair. These hand-crafted items represent the heart of

Lifeline's ministry – a personal touch in the time of medical crisis.

Extending that touch can take a toll on chaplains and volunteers.

"Knowing when to leave something at the hospital and not take it home with you is a big challenge," Fry says.

Ministering to the seriously ill requires people who can balance compassion with a keen sense of boundaries.

"It takes a special breed of person to do pastoral care in the hospitals," Riddle says. "We are constantly on the lookout for those kind of people."

One of them was Dr. Roy Hatch, a NASA retiree who volunteered at Lifeline for six years before his death in March 2003.

"His loss is keenly felt," Riddle says. "He's irreplaceable, but we're praying for a successor."

Through its multi-faceted ministry, Lifeline touches tens of thousands of people every year. In 2002, Compassionate Touch assisted patients and their families from 37 states, 13 nations and 130 Texas counties.

But no matter how far Lifeline's ministry reaches around the globe, or how many volunteers venture into hospitals to support grieving families through the unthinkable, Lifeline's mission is as simple as the end of Matthew's 25th chapter.

"At some point, we'll all be hungry, we'll all be naked, we'll all be sick," Fry says about the importance of Christians working in medical chaplaincy. "That whole Matthew passage says we really don't have a choice but to help others in their hour of need."▲

and rejoice with those who rejoice

at Princeton Theological Seminary, the pieces began to fit. Along with graduating from seminary, White became a chaplain and an ACPE (Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, Inc.) supervisor, a decision that required three to five years of additional training.

White, who attends Sugar Grove Church of Christ in Houston with his wife, Deborah (Brown '72) White; son, Krister ('01); and daughter, high school senior Kourtney, has been the only ACPE supervisor in the Churches of Christ since the early 1980s. An extremely specialized ministry, CPE-trained chaplains must have an M.Div. degree, endorsement by one's faith group, 1,600 hours of supervised CPE training and a year of work experience as a chaplain. And the emotional demands are even tougher.

"It requires a person who has a heart for those who have been broken by life, and who has the emotional and spiritual strength to enter into the unknown over and over again in service to others," he says.

After nearly three decades of ministering to people in their darkest moments, White recalls a prayer he learned years ago to help him remember one of the biggest challenges for any chaplain – to separate himself from the situations in which he must minister every day: "Lord, teach me to care, and not to care."

Brian Hughes ('95) carries out his ministry in an atypical church. He ministers to his scrubs-clad congregation not from a pulpit, but in the hallways and hospital rooms of Good Samaritan Medical Center in Phoenix, Ariz.

"My staff is very much my congregation when it comes to meeting spiritual needs," says Hughes, who is in his second year of a CPE chaplaincy residency.

Much of Hughes' time on the job is spent doing what is known as ministering to the ministers, or providing emotional and spiritual support to hospital staff.

"When I'm taking care of the staff, they're in a better position to take care of the patients," he says.

During the rest of his 12-hour shifts, which he sometimes works back to back, Hughes often

encounters a common chaplain frustration – praying with patients and families he knows he may never see again.

"I often feel like I'm watering a plant that's going by on a conveyor belt," says Hughes, who completed a master's in religious communication at ACU in 1997.

Nevertheless, Hughes claims a passion for medical chaplaincy that was sparked during a summer 1998 trip to Romania, where he worked with a small church and orphanage. Traveling through India the following summer, Hughes spent several weeks working with Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta and also with Daya Dan, a home for handicapped orphans.

Upon returning to the U.S., Hughes completed a Master of Divinity at Princeton Theological Seminary in 2001 and completed CPE units at Cabrini Medical Center in Manhattan and Scott & White Memorial Hospital in Temple, Texas.

Now in Phoenix, where his wife, Jenevieve (Holton '97), is completing her surgical residency, Hughes works primarily in the Intensive Care Unit at Good Samaritan. It's a Level 1 trauma center where he ministers to victims – and families of victims – of car accidents, shootings and stabbings.

"You're kind of just thrown in there," he says. "By and large, you learn on the job."

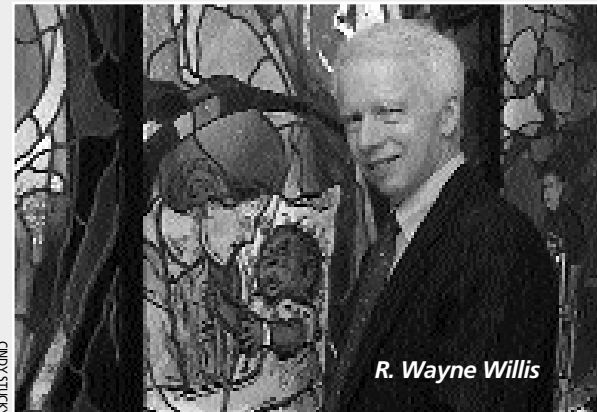
In a diverse area such as Phoenix, Hughes works with patients from a mix of cultural backgrounds. He has ministered to people from different religions, including a Navajo patient in a healing ceremony with a medicine man.

"My job is to connect the person in that room with their God," he says.

Hughes, who looks forward to receiving board certification by the end of this year, constantly strives to be a representative of God in the situations he faces every day – when faith and life don't fit together so easily for patients, their families and hospital staff.

"My job is not to provide answers, but to help them clarify their questions," he says.▲

– DEANA NALL



R. Wayne Willis

CINDY STUCKEY



Lerrill White

MICHAEL STRAVATO



Brian Hughes

TOM STORY