

Pastoral education program is heart, soul of hospital's mission

By **Bruce R. Posten**

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For those with a passion to pursue a career in the medical field, the Reading Hospital School of Health Sciences must seem like a wondrous technological Land of Oz, almost magical with its up-to-date, state-of-the-art computerization and simulations that enhance hands-on, clinical learning.

But those who opt for the school's fifth program, clinical pastoral education, may feel like Dorothy after seeing the Wizard dole out medal, diploma and ticking heart for others, realizing immediately that there is nothing in the Wizard's box for her.

Just as an old-fashioned hot-air balloon ultimately can't take Dorothy home, neither can anything in modern technology really work for today's pastoral students.

No matter. Sophisticated equipment doesn't do it. Simulation is not required.

"Hospitals have become increasingly high tech, and there are many, many benefits to that, but our program is the heart and soul of this hospital's mission of compassion," said the Rev. Dr. Gregory Stoddard, director of the clinical pastoral education program.

And the heart of that program is apparently dealing with the hearts of people, no mannequin, no virtual reality needed.

All that's needed are people — and there are plenty of them — with emotional and spiritual needs that need to be met.

"Our program has been well integrated with all the others," Stoddard said, noting that over the years pastoral education has moved around the Reading Hospital campus under the Department of Chaplaincy Services.

"We have been a growing

program in need of space and we now have a designated seminar room on the second floor here," he said.

The pastoral program, designed for seminary students, ministers of all faiths and qualified lay persons, is designed to help students learn and advance their abilities in giving pastoral care to the sick, Stoddard said.

There is a summer internship program that lasts 11 weeks and an extended program that runs 28 weeks.

"Our methodology is a small group learning experience, usually four to six people," he said.

There is class work, but also 300 hours of clinical work required with real patients and their families at hospitals.

In addition, there is a residency program limited to four applicants. All programs are accredited by the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education.

Stoddard said the curriculum emphasizes three elements: giving knowledge and understanding necessary for spiritual care and ministering; providing skills needed for successful interpersonal and inter-professional relationships; and cultivating awareness in students concerning the needs of others to whom they minister.

Stoddard, a Lutheran minister, is the primary faculty person, but he has two assistants, a rabbi and a priest.

While most of the program's students come from various ministries, Stoddard said there has been a steady stream of nurses opting for enrollment.

"Some of them are looking to develop their skills in spiritual care in their work as nurses," he said. "Others want to branch out in new directions."

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