

Health

Chaplain volunteers share prayer, presence

By Kathleen Schwar
Staff writer

CANANDAIGUA — Eileen Alven's smile could not have been bigger.

Alven, a chaplain's volunteer at F.F. Thompson Hospital, had just visited Josephine Blinn. The patient was healing from a hip fracture suffered in a recent fall.

During the visit, Alven had sat all-ears at Blinn's bedside, as Blinn talked — about having lived in five states and finding New York's ice storms "beautiful, like crystal," about her 51-year-old granddaughter who teaches nursing; and in general about her past. The sun shone in over the windowsill featuring colored daisies and other flowers.

"I'm just sorry you're here in this bed," Alven, a member of St. Dominic's Parish, Shortsville, told the patient.

"Well, I'm going to make it," declared Blinn, looking younger than her 90 "and one-half" years.

In the end, Alven told the woman, "You know when I'm down who I'm coming to see? You."

Alven joined F.F. Thompson's volunteer chaplaincy program when it began about a year ago, after the Rev. Dick McCaughey became director of spiritual care.

As fewer hospitals can afford individual Catholic, Protestant and Jewish chaplains, he said, "more and more are developing volunteer ministries."

One goal of the new Unity Health System (an alliance between Park Ridge and St. Mary's hospitals) is, in fact, to create a formal chaplaincy volunteer pro-



Eileen Alven (left), a chaplain's volunteer, shares a smile with Regina Crowe during a visit at F.F. Thompson Hospital, Canandaigua, July 2.

Matthew Scott/Staff photographer

gram similar to Rev. McCaughey's, according to the Rev. Harriet H. McConnochie, chaplain at Rochester's Park Ridge Hospital.

"We hope to start in the fall," she said, but added that she and Sister Elaine Hollis, SSJ, welcome anyone interested to call now.

"There is a real hope of working closely with parishes and doing training together," she said.

A primary reason for his program, Rev. McCaughey explained, is to integrate — reintegrate, as he put it — spirituality with health care. He announced his new volunteers program in area church bulletins, including St. Dominic's, where it caught Alven's eye.

She and several other Catholics are among 35 chaplain's volunteers. The volunteers include clergy, former nurses, two church secretaries, artists, laborers and businessmen. But their backgrounds don't matter, Rev. McCaughey said. It is their faith and compassion that matter.

"Eileen brings her Catholic

heritage, doctrines — all that's a part of her — but at the point she ministers to patients it is not from a Catholic perspective," he said. "But a Catholic perspective informs her faith."

"Whether I go in or Eileen goes in, it's just as legitimate," Rev. McCaughey said. His calling is no more worthy than hers, he said.

"It is a calling forth," he said. "I think that's what is breaking down, thank God, the hierarchical order of ministry."

Besides, when the volunteers visit, the patients don't "put on their minister manners," he said.

Although the hospital screens and orients volunteers, and Rev. McCaughey provides ongoing training, he tells his volunteers,

"You are responding to a call in your life to do this work, so I assume God has already equipped you in fundamental ways."

"I want them to utilize who they are," he said.

He reported that one volunteer, for example, was playing tic-tac-toe so patiently with a young boy one time that family members mistook him (from behind) for the boy's grandfather.

Another male volunteer regularly breaks into song, and has sung Gospel hymns in the emergency room, Alven noted.

"It is very effective," she said of his singing.

"Sometimes we are just there with the person, and invite the person if he or she would like to say a prayer before we leave," said Alven, whose background includes teaching and family therapy. "It is a ministry of prayer and presence."

"Hopefully what we are doing is to make people aware of God in the process of healing, in becoming well," Alven said. "Or if there is no hope of recovery, that there be more awareness of God"

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