

# a journey for *hope*

WRITTEN BY KARA HOEGER

**Don stays with families in hospital waiting areas and visits patients in their rooms.**

**He sits in prayer. He sits in counsel.**

**He sits in silence.**



British author C.S. Lewis said, “Think of me as a fellow-patient in the same hospital, who having been admitted a little earlier, could give some advice.”

Don Dahlheimer checked into Elmhurst Memorial Hospital 15 years ago. A patient gown doesn't drape his body, rather a crisp, muted gray coat. No stethoscope rests around his neck, rather tattered Bible pages peek from his pocket. As Manager of Pastoral Care Services, Dahlheimer's uniform presence serves to spiritually heal patients and families at EMH.

After having served in parish ministry for four years, Dahlheimer said that he felt called to a ministry, which would bring him in daily contact with those who were sick and suffering. In 1990 he completed a two-year Clinical Pastoral Education program in Chaplaincy and Marriage and Family Therapy at EMH, and accepted a chaplain position in EMH's oncology program.

Hospital pastoral care addresses patients with varied beliefs and customs in health and illness. A non-denominational hospital, EMH recognizes the values of faith, no matter the particular beliefs.

## **Acting as a spiritual companion**

In the oncology area, universal life and death issues are inherent. Encountering hard questions for hard-hitting diagnoses, Dahlheimer often meets up with patients and their families in the midst of intense questioning: *Why is this happening to me/us?* “I learned early on, there are no easy answers,” Dahlheimer said. “I learned to journey with people, and that's what keeps me coming back.”

He paused. “It's sacred ground,” he said, “to help people on their journey.”

The way he explains it is to glimpse the way those with a life-threatening illness have seen it. For a young man with sarcoma and two small children, spilled milk is just spilled milk, not a reason for raised voices.

“It's neat to be with people during these small awakenings,” Dahlheimer said. “These realizations were always within them, life was just so busy to see the important things.”

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“As a spiritual guide, I don’t give answers but rather help patients explore that part,” Dahlheimer explained. “I provide a space for people to enter surgery, for example, with a better frame of mind.”

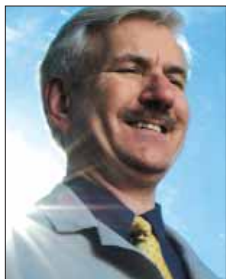
“Some are very religious, others are not, but all people are spiritual with beliefs and values that have formed throughout their life experiences,” he said. “I meet people where they’re at and we go from there.”



There’s a pace to Dahlheimer’s day that allows him to meet with the other chaplains as well as an interdisciplinary patient-care team. Dahlheimer may visit a patient by way of nursing staff consults, physician or social worker referrals, or through his own assessment of patient diagnoses.

#### **Ministering in the community**

For those who’ve lost a loved one, Dahlheimer leads a bereavement counseling group. “The group builds a community amongst themselves,” Dahlheimer said. “In grief, it takes a while for the heart to catch up to what the head knows.” It comes full circle for Dahlheimer, who oftentimes had sat at the bedside of an attendee’s loved one.



Communication is a remedy Dahlheimer often administers. He finds himself soothing a patient’s family when urgent medical treatment is being delivered. Another hour he’s discussing a patient’s final hours with the caregivers and family.

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On Tuesdays and Thursdays there’s a prayer service in the Hospital’s chapel. On other days, Dahlheimer oversees the Hospital’s 7-year-old parish nurse program. The program provides an Elmhurst Memorial Home Health nurse to three community parishes to serve as health educators and advocates.

Together with chaplain Mike McMillen, Dahlheimer supervises the Hospital’s Clinical Pastoral Education program, which annually enrolls five resident chaplains. “The staff relies on the program and calls on any of the resident chaplains not only in a crisis but also during any tearful situation,” Dahlheimer said. “We really are a part of the patient care team at Elmhurst Memorial Hospital.”