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Chaplain Corrects
Myths of Leprosy

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By Mary Burns

CARRVILLE, La. (BP)--To most people, the word "leprosy" conjures up visions of running sores, decaying appendages and demon-possessed victims shouting "Unclean, Unclean." But Chaplain Oscar Harris, Protestant chaplain of the U. S. Public Health Service hospital here is trying to demythologize leprosy.

As a Southern Baptist and a Navy chaplain for more than 20 years, he has been Protestant chaplain at the hospital for 10 years.

His ministry is unique, he says, because "it is a ministry to persons with a chronic disease with a stigma, and for a long period of time." A person can be cured of leprosy in as little as six months, or he may spend a lifetime on the hospital campus.

Some of the patients have been at the leprosarium for more than 40 years. However, many patients return to normal lives, remaining under a doctor's supervision.

Probably one of the most dreaded diseases, leprosy is also one of the most misunderstood. It's proper name is Hansen's Disease--a disease of the nerves. An organism resembling the tuberculosis germ attacks the skin and some of the nerves, but not the central nervous system. One of the first signs of Hansen's Disease is the loss of sensations in the body.

Chaplain Harris said that it is not leprosy that causes mutilation and injury to the body, so commonly associated with the disease; but this loss of sensation. Because the patient cannot feel pain he can do great harm to himself unaware.

Harris now sees about 300 patients. He both visits the infirmary where patients needing "custodial care" are kept, and corresponds with churches and with the families of his patients, meeting many of the 1,000 visitors who come to the Carrville hospital each month.

He conducts regular chapel services on Wednesday nights and Sundays. His wife directs a small choir composed of patients. Sometimes special services are held for Spanish-speaking patients.

Harris does not consider his ministry so different from other hospital chaplains.

"The big problem is when a patient enters the hospital," he explained. "They have such horrible ideas about the disease. They don't know what the disease is. One lady even lost her speech and her ability to walk out of fear of the disease."

Harris sees the patients soon after they enter the hospital to help them make the initial adjustment.

The chaplain explained that the patients' adjustment depends in large measure on the reaction of the doctor who discovers that the patient has leprosy. "Many doctors don't know much about the disease," he said.

Some families reject a member with Hansen's Disease, Harris said, so his work also involves counseling with these families.

The chaplain has watched his patients' attitudes change during his 10 years. "They used to change their names; but this doesn't happen anymore."

Harris explains that leprosy is hardly as contagious as people imagine. "None of the hospital staff members have contracted the disease," he said.

The hospital is located on 325 acres, about 25 miles from Baton Rouge. The patients live in dormitories; there are also apartments for the married patients. "Many of the patients meet here, fall in love and get married," Harris said.

Patients can get passes to leave the leprosarium for as long as 60 days. They participate in normal recreation. The hospital grounds includes a golf course. There is even a patients' Lions Club.

Besides caring for leprosy patients, the hospital is also involved in training medical missionaries. It conducts two seminars a year, each lasting eight days. The seminars are inter-denominational, sponsored by American Leprosy Missions of New York.

Chaplain Harris' ministry is peculiar in the minds of most people because the stigma surrounding leprosy is as old as the Bible. But an examination of the contents of his sermons reveal a message vital to every person and not just to lepers--"hope, courage and strength to face the task of living."



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Therapists Emphasize
Christian Dimension

By Dallas Lee

ATLANTA (BP)--A group of counselors and therapists here are disarming religion-based suspicion of psychology by combining professional competence with Christian insight.

About 15 professionals in mental health fields have established a clinic where troubled people "are free to come knowing that counselors will not threaten their faith, but hopefully strengthen it."

Paul Walker, acting director of the Atlanta Counseling Center, said:

"We are professional in approach and Christian in value structure. We are evangelical, and that term is large enough to allow for professional competence without sacrificing the realities of Christian encounter."

As a result of this religious orientation, and the conservative statement of faith that defines it, the clinic is fast extending counseling to people who generally could be expected to reject the offerings of psychology.

Many people from conservative religious tradition, Walker said, are suspicious of psychology, "but when they are exposed to the meaning of mental health in a Christian sense, they are open to us."

The need so often, Walker said, is for a person to have guidance clarifying and sorting through his value structure in order to recognize and verbalize his feelings, and then to cope with them realistically.

"We try to help them work through to what it is to be in Christ, to love one's self," he said. "With the freedom you find in Christ, you can look at yourself openly and honestly, understand the truth, and let the truth make you free."

A statement of faith defines the Christian rationale for the clinic, and each counselor must accept it. It confirms the doctrine of the trinity, the divinity of Christ, the atonement of the cross, the active presence of the Holy Spirit, the verbal inspiration of the scriptures, the necessity of spiritual rebirth and the promise of eternal life.

The group of professionals span a wide range of disciplines, from psychotherapy to pastoral counseling, and represent a variety of denominational backgrounds including Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian and Church of God.

The idea for a Christian Counseling Clinic in Atlanta originated with Dr. William S. Donaldson, professor of rehabilitation counseling at Georgia State University, who brought together other therapists interested in providing Christian counseling. (There are a handful of similar clinics in the country.)

The non-profit clinic is in its second year now, working with about 25 people a week who are referred by pastors, doctors, lawyers and social agencies.

Only Claire Underwood, a Southern Baptist graduate of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary with a master of religious education in counseling is a fulltime staff member. The other therapists block out so much time a week to be available at the clinic.

Walker, for example, is pastor of the Mt. Perrin Church of God and a doctoral candidate in psychology at Georgia State University in Atlanta. Others are professors, private psychiatric practitioners, or hospital-related personnel.

The plan, Walker said, is to grow into a fulltime staff situation, perhaps eventually with satellite clinics that draw on an even larger group of Christian professionals. The sliding fee scale also will increasingly make this normally expensive counseling service available to lower-income persons.

Therapeutic counseling is currently the primary intention of the center, but increasingly and an education role is gaining attention.

The intentions of the center go beyond counseling to include training, research and service. A continuing education program is being developed to help pastors sharpen counseling skills, and family life conferences are on the agenda.

A syllabus of proposed pastor workshop subjects includes human development and the psychology of religion, pastoral counseling and legal implications, counseling persons with sexual problems, dealing with anxiety and depression, and some 70 other subjects.

Another growing outreach aimed at pastors is therapeutic counseling, providing pastors with unthreatening environments in which to work through the tensions and frustrations of the ministry. "This is a definite need," Walker said.

One intriguing assignment is being negotiated with the Atlanta Police Department, in which the clinic will test new recruits, predict their behavior in certain environments and circumstances, and follow-up with guidance and evaluation.



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