

Chaplain enjoys hands-on ministry

Written by Tim Parrish For The Leaf-Chronicle
May. 07

theleafchronicle.com

CLARKSVILLE, TENN. — As an ordained minister of 25 years and a pastor for 18 years of those years, the transition to chaplaincy was one that Charles Thornburg looked forward to with positive anticipation and not trepidation. It has been everything he hoped for and more.

Rev. Thornburg is Chaplain and Director of Spirituality at Signature HealthCARE of Clarksville. Signature is the former Montgomery County Rehab Center on Old Farmers Road. It is the second part of his title that lets you know his role is significantly more than that of a chaplain.

Thornburg is the only full-time staff chaplain at any nursing home, skilled-living or assisted-living facility in Montgomery County. These days, most facilities use volunteer chaplains or part-time chaplains to assist with residents.

Some hospitals are eliminating full-time chaplains. That is a major difference between Signature HealthCARE facilities and other facilities. It is in a growth mode, not a cut-back mode.

Not only does he serve as chaplain to the residents of a 120-bed nursing home and rehab center, he serves as chaplain to the [families](#)

of those residents and to all the employees. He has an active and hands-on role in the areas of nursing care, [behavioral health](#), rehabilitation, spiritual health, grief counseling when necessary, and all this in the interest of the resident's health.

Thornburg serves on Care Teams and is involved with the intake process as soon as a new resident arrives. Care Teams involve personnel from all major areas. No one is excluded.

Time and again, Thornburg has been called to assist with a resident who was not comfortable discussing his or her health issues with another employee. "We look at what we do as very holistic. I will listen and [talk](#)

[with a resident](#) about a concern and then relay that concern to the appropriate person and it is addressed.

"That is not to say other facilities don't do that, but with Signature, we know that for our residents dealing with major health problems, especially our older residents, immediate and regular access to a chaplain is important to them," he said.

An interest in hands-on ministry

Thornburg attended Pentecostal Theological Seminary in Cleveland, Tennessee. It is the seminary affiliated with Lee University, a Church of God institution. He also has a [graduate degree](#)

[in counseling](#).

"I became interested in chaplain work while in the seminary. Being pastor of a congregation is very gratifying, but for me, I also wanted more hands-on ministering to those who are physically and emotionally hurting, and especially those in long-term nursing facilities."

Chaplain Thornburg arrived at the Clarksville facility in summer of 2012. His years of education, training, and work experience had served him well as he arrived prepared for the next chapter in his life. His background of serving those in need includes working with a benevolence program with a Georgia UMC Conference for three years.

Crossing denominational lines

In describing himself, he quickly states, “I am not a Church of God of Prophecy chaplain. I am a Christian chaplain who serves the spiritual and behavioral needs of everybody here, regardless of their denomination. I do not proselytize, nor do any Signature chaplains. I respect all faith traditions. I have worked with atheists, and I respect their viewpoint and their privacy.”


Thornburg welcomes visits by outside chaplains, pastors and ministers. Some denominations offer worship services and Bible studies at the facility. That is fine with him. He conducts a daily devotional for employees, offers a weekly interdenominational worship service and interacts with residents and their families on either an individual basis or in a group setting.

Looking ahead

Signature HealthCARE has a short, to-the-point vision statement, one that Chaplain Thornburg honors. It reads, “To radically change the landscape of long-term care forever.”

It is a young company that now owns and operates 90 facilities in several southeastern states.

Thornburg commented, “At a time when the economics and [delivery](#)

of health care is very challenging, we are growing and investing rather than cutting back. When I arrive here each  day, I know I have the opportunity to help others.”

He would like to see new programs added in the future, especially those that will encourage residents to get out of their rooms and interact with their fellow residents and employees. “I am always open to suggestions and ideas. That is how we grow.”

To learn more about Signature HealthCARE of Clarksville, visit the website at www.shcofclarkville.com.