

Sister Catherine Ann MacGillivray manages the Spiritual and Religious Care Department in Saint Martha's Regional Hospital in Antigonish. This year marks the 25th anniversary of her ministry there yet her enthusiasm and passion for the job do not seem to have diminished with time.

Spiritual and Religious Care Department at St. Martha's Hospital consists of 5 members and works as a team to provide the best care possible. They respond to the needs of patients, staff and members of the community. They accompany patients as they go through serious illness and sometimes death, offering emotional and spiritual support, and sometimes also helping to access financial assistance. If necessary, they coordinate religious services that meet the needs of patients such as contacting their clergy person, helping to respond to sacramental needs, and the ministry of prayer. Their services are directed at people of all faiths or no faith, the poor and the marginalized.

"Those who benefit are the ones that we meet, whether it is in patients' rooms, cafeteria, in the hallways... and we try to greet people with kindness and the respect that they deserve. And in meeting rooms, where patients' rounds are held or at other meetings when issues are discussed, we often shed light on the areas that need to be looked at. So, it's a matter of justice."

When entering a patient's room, Sr. Catherine Ann focuses completely on the person, her mind open and without judgement, ready to hear the individual needs and to respond to the situation in front of her. Sometimes it's a prayer, other times a serious talk, but it might just be as simple as providing a radio for a patient to distract their mind from their ailment or bringing someone a newspaper and chit-chatting.



Sister Catherine Ann MacGillivray

The needs of patients vary, and the pandemic brought its own set of complications such as 'no visitor' periods and strict health protocols. The Department had to adapt, the hospital community sacrificed time and space, while keeping the initial focus in mind: providing the best care possible. Sr. Catherine Ann recalls many instances when she provided updates outside in the parking lot to family members who were not allowed inside the hospital; she learnt to FaceTime to help an elderly patient connect with her family on a daily basis. During the pandemic, she has been available even more than before to patients and their families. The main challenge has been to find a balanced approach to life when the demand is so great as she finds it impossible to turn her face away when somebody needs her help.

"Sometimes the last thing I do is pray with somebody. Even if it is the most religious person on the face of the Earth or a Sister. Only if I absolutely know that prayer is what they want at that moment, I will do it."



Saint Martha's regional Hospital in Antigonish, NS

Sr. Catherine Ann was educated in Clinical Pastoral Care and has years of hands-on experience. She credits her predecessors in the Department of Spiritual and Religious Care, Sr. Joan Fultz and Sr. Peter Claver McNeary, as well as another wisdom figure, Sr. Peggy MacFarlane, with tremendous influence on her career. These mentors taught her by word and example and provided support without judgement, helping to build her skills as a Spiritual caregiver. She observed, for example, Sr. Peter Claver practicing ‘corridor ministry’ – on her way from and to work she would stop and speak to every person that she passed on the way. Sr. Catherine Ann strongly believes in building trust and community spirit. She too is a people person, accessible and accepting. She wants to get to know people so that when times get tough, she is not just a name on a piece of paper for them, but a living, breathing person that they know they can approach. Confidentiality of information is held sacred in her heart, and it is the responsibility of the Department to safeguard it.

“Part of building a community and my responsibility is going day to day and just praying that you speak to who needs to be spoken to.”

Sr. Catherine Ann is supporting hospital staff in many ways and relies on their help too. No one is working in isolation, especially during the pandemic, which has been difficult for everyone in the hospital community. Being one person with a small team, she relies on good communication with nursing staff to know which patients need her attention right away on any given day.

But her role in the hospital community is much more than that. Over the last number of years, she found herself many times being an advocate for patients, especially seniors. The numerous letters she writes shed light on a particular situation of a patient, providing a more holistic view for the decision-makers.

“I’m not afraid to speak up and I’m not afraid to listen and learn either, because sometimes I may not have the whole picture.”

She feels her team is needed the most when people feel powerless. She goes by her mentor’s saying: “All you are doing is helping people to access the strength they have within”. Empowering people is an important skill she practices and hopes to teach others. Elderly are especially vulnerable in our society and need to be given a voice.

“When you look at all aspects of a person’s life, that makes it complete. You have to consider how they feel, not just physically but emotionally.”

By building relationships with patients, Sr. Catherine Ann learns about aspects of their life that may not pertain to their physical assessment yet are vital for their wellbeing and proper care. Advocating for patients and securing resources are all part of her way of working for justice in the world. This belongs to the main mission of the Sisters of St. Martha: “to hear, embrace and respond to the cry for Gospel Hospitality.”

A native of Antigonish, Sr. Catherine Ann was raised to share what she has and who she is and to help people whenever she can. Naturally, her spirit fits that of the Marthas.

I learnt hospitality at an early age, my parents would say things to me like “trust in prayer”, “don’t judge”, “be kind”, “be polite”, “be respectful”. When I entered the Congregation, the charism of the Marthas was not that different from the values of my own family. Faith and hospitality were important and being there for people when they needed”.



Place of Peace Garden, adjacent to the hospital parking lot, is also a responsibility of the Spiritual Care Department and an integral part of supporting people spiritually and physically.

“The call to Gospel Hospitality has called me to the bedside of the dying, to supporting the grieving, to advocating for the voiceless, to helping people access resources such as food or presiding at a burial service, to sitting with somebody when they’re grieving, visiting the home of people after sudden, tragic death and to questioning unjust structures. It all fits with what we say we’re talking about. Responding to Gospel Hospitality means to listen with a loving heart and have the courage to respond out of love.”

Sr. Catherine Ann is not hiding behind the mission statement, she is living it. She is constantly moving amongst the people in the best way she can, building trust and relationships. But she also knows the importance of sitting down and having a cup of tea, just being present in the moment. The gift of presence means to be able to just be with oneself or with others fully.

