Strong Faith, Fervent Love: Meeting the Needs of Others

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s (LCMS) Specialized Pastoral Ministry (SPM) trains and endorses ministers to serve people who are ill, imprisoned, aging, troubled, conflicted and isolated. Through chaplaincy, pastoral counseling and clinical pastoral education, these ordained or commissioned ministers encounter people in the midst of everyday settings as they bear witness to the love of God in Christ Jesus.

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The word chaplain often invokes images of battlefields and military personnel, front lines and deployments. But through LCMS Specialized Pastoral Ministry (SPM), chaplains are trained and endorsed for work right here at home. Acknowledging human need, just as Christ did among those for whom He cared, chaplains come alongside those who are hurting in both body and soul, declaring Christ’s love.

Through SPM programs, hundreds of ordained and commissioned ministers of the Gospel have been equipped and formed for this unique kind of work, serving as chaplains, counselors and clinical pastoral educators.

Bearing Christ’s mercy to those who are suffering, specialized pastoral ministers offer His comfort and peace to people with special needs in congregations, on the streets through Emergency Services Chaplaincy, within agencies as pastoral counselors, or in institutions like hospitals, prisons, hospices, counseling centers, retirement homes and homes for those who have physical or mental disabilities.

These ordained, commissioned or consecrated church workers speak with more unchurched people in a given week than most parish pastors do in a year due to their specialized settings.

“We trust that the Holy Spirit is in the midst of our ministry,” said the Rev. Joel Hempel, interim director for SPM. “We are privileged instruments for God’s work.”

For Deaconess Lorinda Schwarz, who serves at the Oregon Department of Corrections, ministering in this context often means “you move as quietly as possible into a rippling pond of crisis and try to be of spiritual and emotional support.”

Schwarz spends time with those who are incarcerated and in the midst of some of the greatest crises they will experience in their lives. “We move in and out of the lives of people who are in crisis, pain or sometimes just quietly suffering,” said Schwarz. “Though we rarely encounter the individuals again, we simply trust God to use us to meet the needs of others.”

Synod’s SPM office provides ecclesiastical endorsement for all LCMS non-military chaplains, ensuring that they are well equipped to represent Jesus Christ to the suffering, apply Lutheran theology in crisis situations and counsel using well developed pastoral-care skills. Once endorsed, those in SPM receive ongoing support through consultation, conferences, educational events and the newsletter, “A Pastoral Touch.” Seminarians and clergy who are interested and qualified may apply for a SPM scholarship for training and endorsement in chaplaincy, pastoral counseling or clinical pastoral education.

By God’s mercy, SPM chaplains bear witness to Christ in the midst of weakness, show mercy to those who are suffering and invite those who are hurting to a robust and cross-centered life together in Him.