



Healthcare CHAPLAINCY

M.Div. Concentration prepares students to minister to those who are suffering

When she was just 17, Genie Potes's mother was murdered by her stepfather. Potes had the support of family in the aftermath, but in retrospect, she didn't receive the kind of spiritual guidance she needed during that agonizing time.

As a result, "I turned my back on God for 20 years," she said.

Potes did find her way back to faith — and to a calling to help others in crisis as a chaplain. She served as a Stephen minister in her church and as a lay chaplain at Houston Methodist Hospital.

Now, as a Perkins student preparing to become a full-time, board-certified chaplain, Potes is grateful for the new concentration in Healthcare Chaplaincy offered at Perkins School of Theology.

The program was launched last fall and is open to all Master of Divinity students. To date, four have enrolled.

"This is a unique opportunity for students to study theology and learn from seasoned chaplains and hospital administrators

at the same time," said Dr. Hugo Magallanes, associate dean for Academic Affairs. Most in-person classes for the Houston-Galveston (H-G) program are taught at Houston Methodist Hospital as part of a partnership that creates a number of opportunities for Perkins students interested in chaplaincy.

In addition to the basic requirements of an M.Div., students who enroll in the concentration must complete 12 hours of required courses, including Level 1 Clinical Pastoral Education,

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GENIE POTES



Bioethics, and Health Care/Holy Care, a January term immersion course that gives students hands-on experiences at Houston Methodist Hospital. In addition, students must complete six hours (two courses) in core electives, choosing from 13 options, including; Disability Studies; the Bible and Theology; Patristic Anthropology and Soteriology; Ethics, Theology, and Children; Ethics, Theology, and Family; Contemporary Moral Issues; and Evil, Suffering and Death in the New Testament. Students are also required to participate in two one-day events (one per semester), that include a lecture sponsored by Houston Methodist Hospital, participation in a shadowing program, and sharing their personal reflections with seasoned hospital chaplains and administrators.

Students currently enrolled in the concentration say the coursework provides solid spiritual and intellectual grounding for their planned careers. Michele Mrak, a part-time M.Div. student, praised an elective course, *Evil, Suffering and Death in the New Testament*, taught by Dr. Jaime Clark-Soles.

“She probed into death and dying from a scriptural perspective that was so powerful and so enlightening,” Mrak said. “That really brought out for me why we’re doing this kind of work in the world. It’s about the transformative love of God.”

Potes praised Pastoral Care Special Problems, an elective taught by Dr. Charles Millikan in 2020.

“We learned about other people’s faiths, to be able to take the good from them and help us grow spiritually,” she said. “There was a section dealing with end-of-life issues, including the debate about quality of life versus quantity of life. We also studied a book, *Tales from the Bedside*, about one minister’s work in pastoral care in hospitals. Of all the classes I’ve taken so far, this one has spoken to me the most.”

PROFESSIONAL PREPARATION

The Healthcare Chaplaincy concentration is one step toward certification as a professional chaplain, which also requires a bachelor’s degree, an M.Div., and a full year in a clinical pastoral education (CPE) residency. Houston Methodist is one of the largest CPE programs in the state of Texas, with 31 CPE students in the hospital system.

Claudia Stephens, a part-time M.Div. student enrolled in the concentration, earned the first unit for her CPE last summer at Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital in Dallas.

“I worked everywhere they would allow us to go — the emergency room, surgery, labor and delivery and the ICUs,” she said. “This was during COVID, but I loved every single minute of it. You’re helping people who are in crisis. I want to be there for people. I want to encounter them at this critical crossroads.” The Healthcare Chaplaincy concentration is open to Perkins students in Dallas as well as those in the Houston-Galveston program.



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MICHELLE MRAK



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BRYAN HOFF

Dallas students must travel to Houston in order to complete the additional course requirements not available online or in Dallas. There is no required timeline as long as students earn sufficient hours/credit to fulfill the requirements of this concentration.

Program leaders say the Healthcare Chaplaincy concentration responds to student interest as well as market demand for chaplains.

“We are seeing a large number of students and prospective students who are interested in chaplaincy, especially hospital chaplaincy,” said Dr. Dallas Gingles, site director of the Houston-Galveston Extension Program. “There is also a growing demand in clinical settings for chaplains and others who are capable of serving the spiritual needs of their people (both patients and providers), as well as for those who are capable of serving on ethics boards and helping to shape the culture of the institution. We think that this concentration will help our students develop those skill sets.”

Chaplaincy offers career opportunities at a time when employment options for M. Div. graduates are dwindling. A growing number of other institutions — hospitals as well as corporations and the military — will look to add chaplains in the coming years. As an example, Houston Methodist’s staff has grown over the past 15 years, from a dozen to 85 chaplains (36 part-time and full-time staff chaplains, 18 affiliated chaplains, and 31 chaplain residents and extended students).

WOUNDED HEALERS

Like Potes, each of the students enrolled shared a personal experience that shaped their interest in the chaplaincy.

Bryan Hoff was in the room when his wife’s aunt passed away in 2013. It was a sad occasion, but also a pivotal one. Death, he believes, is a sacred transition, like birth and marriage. He hopes to serve patients and their family members in this difficult time.

“That’s why I’m so drawn to palliative care,” said Hoff, a second-year M.Div. student. “I feel a call from God that is humbling. It’s not a sense of heroism but a sense of mourning and crying with those who experience a genuine loss.”

A series of deaths in her family also led Claudia Stephens to choose the Healthcare Chaplaincy concentration. She lost her husband, mother, father, sister and several extended family members within the space of just a few years.

“Each death was different, but all engaged me at a powerful emotional and spiritual level,” she said. “Some might wish to run from that. But I felt loved, protected and upheld by God, the world and other people during those horrible days. I want to be with people who are in those situations, to help them connect with their spirituality.”

Potes concurs, adding that she’s grateful for this Healthcare Chaplaincy concentration. Said Potes, “It’s preparing me to do what I feel God’s calling me to: meeting people in those sacred spaces where they are hurting, and trying to lift them up spiritually, knowing that the mind, body and spirit are all connected.”