

Footpath of Faith

By Jacqueline Sarver

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow said
“...into every life some rain must fall...”
and when it falls it is often difficult to find our way through the deluge. Knowing that in hard times our paths are lined with stepping stones to help keep our feet dry and our heads high is often the one thing that can be counted on. We each face difficult challenges, but one that is common and perhaps inevitable for most is a trip to the hospital. In Houston, we are fortunate to have the Texas Medical Center at our doorstep, and to have access to some of the most talented and revered medical minds of our time.

Talent, however, is not always enough. Another essential aspect of medical health and well-being is the spiritual one. The Texas Medical Center (TMC) deals with this need through the presence of its many chapels and prayer rooms. Comprising about 675 acres, the TMC has often been called a “city within a city” and as such, it is certainly one of the best spiritually represented cities in Texas. There are nine major chapels/sanctuaries within its boundaries and dozens of prayer and meditation rooms. The Institute for Religion and Health, a foundation formed solely to address the spiritual and ethical questions raised by modern healthcare, stands as a beacon lighting the way for the footpath of faith etched into the Medical Center.

In considering each location as a stepping stone in this footpath of faith and a stop along the way of spiritual and mental healing, we gain an understanding of how important this concept is in our lives, and in the workings of the Texas Medical Center. Learning about each sanctuary gives insight into the spiritual forethought that many of Texas’ great philanthropists have demonstrated by donating their money, talents, and names to these chapels. This short “walking tour” of the Medical Center’s spiritual footpath will give you a picture of the importance that each hold in the healing of minds, bodies, and souls.



Institute for Religion and Health
Photograph by Jacqueline Sarver

The Institute for Religion and Health

Most important paths have a marker or beacon. Without them weary travelers may not know that a path exists that will make the going easier, and others may mistake important paths for switchbacks or dead ends. This is the very reason that the Institute of Religion was founded. In 1955, a group of medical, business, and religious leaders in Houston recognized that the spiritual as well as the physical needs of patients needed to be satisfied. After careful research they determined that “an accredited program for residencies and other forms of service in the Medical Center,” should be established, which would serve as a connection between the medical and spiritual realms of care.¹ They appointed their first director, The Reverend Dr. Dawson Bryan, to charter the path of this new institution. In 1960,

the Institute moved into its own building with a tall tower that made it visible throughout much of the Medical Center. Until the 1970s, the Institute was greatly involved in the spiritual life of the TMC, but the overwhelming growth and evolution of healthcare caused individual hospitals to create spiritual centers of their own. This change of focus did not diminish the Institute’s role in healthcare, but rather strengthened it.

As medical technology has advanced, so has the question of medical ethics. The Institute has led the way in recruiting and sponsoring workshops and seminars on various topics. The current executive director of the Institute, The Reverend John E. Fellers, has strived in the face of this revolution of thoughts and ideals to maintain the quality of service offered by the center. The Institute expanded its name in 2002 to reflect this evolving responsibility, and it is now officially “The Institute for Religion and Health.” The Institute serves its purpose well, as a beacon and guidepost for the spiritual side of the TMC. Unfortunately, it has met hardship as well. In June 2001, tragedy struck Houston and the Medical Center in the form of Tropical Storm Allison. Due to the extensive structural damage sustained by the Institute, it was forced to find a new home. Now located just outside the Medical Center near the intersection of Kirby and Greenbriar, the Institute continues in full force its three-pronged mission to the Medical Center: service, research, and education.

The Children’s Chapel— Texas Children’s Hospital

It is difficult to imagine what kind of a room would offer peace and comfort to a child or a family in the throes of a medical crisis...until you visit the Children’s Chapel at Texas Children’s Hospital. The room has no sharp angles, no overpowering colors or themes, no abrupt “notice me” decorations. Inside there are only curves and subdued lighting. It is



The Children's Chapel, Texas Children's Hospital, was given in loving memory of Margaret Wiess Elkins by her family. Courtesy Texas Children's Hospital

located near the surgery suite and Pediatric Intensive Care Unit, but is so non-traditional and inviting that the haze of noise outside does not interfere with the peace inside.

Entry is made through a curved hallway, which leads to an oval room occupied by upholstered chairs and benches. Even the "pulpit" area, if it can be called that, is round. Just in front of that circular focal point are rounded rails and kneelers, and the backdrop, completing the circle, is comprised of shimmering pearl blue art glass. Overhead, a circular skylight draws in natural light, as requested by the children who shared their wishes with the architects.

Recessed into the walls in the seating area are lighted panels that change from one dusky color to another. They resemble cosmic clouds or worlds being created, or anything a young mind can imagine. The ceiling is a mass of sparkling stars, an invitation to explore the universe, with lighting effects that change the aura from dawn to dusk and into the night every twelve minutes. There are no hymnals, crosses, or religious icons in this room. Here there is

only peace and hope. On one side of the room stands a tree: The Tree of Hope. The directives for the tree, written on a small placard near the wall, are simple:

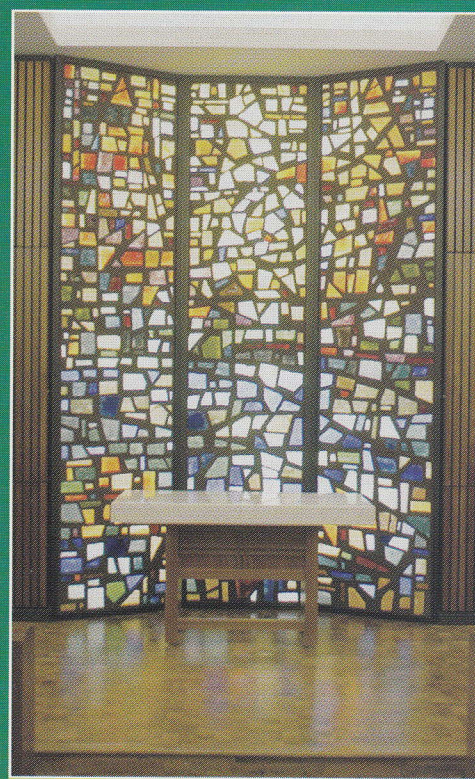
Children, young and old, big and small, everyone is invited to add prayers, poems, quotes and drawings to the Tree of Hope. The tree, a symbol of growth and strength, stands to provide a silent place for comfort and rest. Help our tree bloom in richness of color by seeding it with your prayers of anguish and compassion, thanksgiving and sorrow, faith, hope and love. Let the Tree of Hope embrace you.

Adorning the tree are many pastel pieces of paper, each with a thought, prayer, or cry of thanksgiving. Each is signed by the writer and has a story to tell. Beneath the tree is a basket full of empty pages, waiting to be filled by the hopeful ones who come to this quiet place to ask a blessing or to offer thanks.

The Mirtha G. Dunn Interfaith Chapel—Memorial Hermann Hospital

In June 2004, the Dunn Interfaith Chapel was rededicated in a special ceremony, with a new location, but the same peaceful feeling. The original chapel, first dedicated in 1976, quickly became a sparkling gem in the Medical Center. Modeled after the chapel at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, it was a freestanding building located in a small courtyard behind the hospital. Benches and low walls surrounded the building, inviting all to sit and pray or ponder. Many couples said their "I dos" in the old Dunn Chapel, many babies were blessed in its sanctuary, and many funerals and memorial services were held there as well. It also stood as another testament to the giving nature of the Dunn Family.

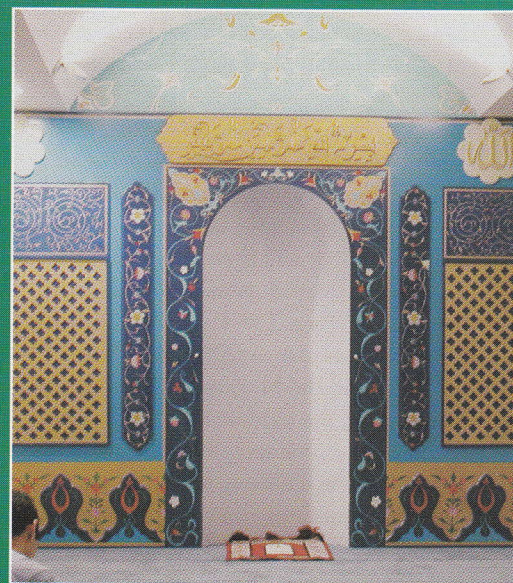
However, vast changes were about to take place. Because of the unique design, the chapel was always vulnerable to water leaks. Following the rains that caused the flooding in June of 2001, the chapel went into limited use while decisions were being made about its repair. Nestled in its private courtyard, the chapel did not have the protection of surrounding structures to lessen the effects of the weather. On September 11, 2001, during a prayer service for the victims of 9/11, a piece of glass fell from one of the stained glass panels near the apex of the building. In



Mirtha G. Dunn Interfaith Chapel, Memorial Hermann Hospital. Courtesy Memorial Hermann Hospital

an eerie way, and as a somewhat fitting salute to the tragedies of 2001, the chapel was closed that day.

Services continued to be held, often meeting in the public areas of the hospital. Not until May 2004 did the chapel get a new home. Now located within the hospital building near the majestic atrium,



Muslim Prayer Center, The Methodist Hospital. Courtesy The Methodist Hospital

much of the original building's spirit remains. Some of the original stained glass has been transplanted into the new chapel along with marble from the original altar and the hammered bronze doors that grace the entrance. Rick Smith, Manager of Chaplaincy at Memorial Hermann Hospital, feels that "people need a place to express their faith, regardless of circumstances" and this makes places of worship and meditation essential, especially in a hospital setting.² With a brand new chapel facility dedicated and in use, the public can once again enjoy a place of peace and tranquility at Memorial Hermann Hospital.

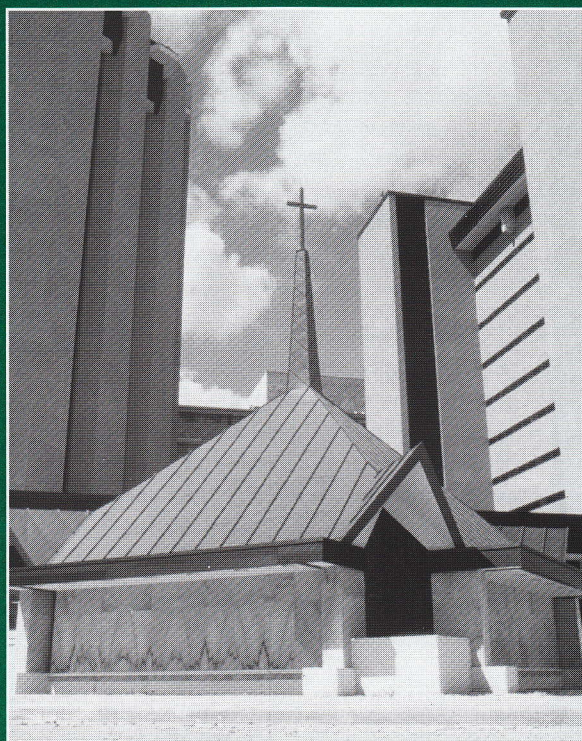
The Muslim Prayer Center— The Methodist Hospital

Although many hospitals in the Texas Medical Center have Muslim prayer rooms, Methodist also has a Muslim Prayer Center. The overwhelming sense that surrounds this area is that of community. As with all the spiritual centers in the Medical Center, the Muslim Prayer Center is a place of welcome for many international visitors who come to Houston. On any given day, both before and after scheduled prayer times, you will find a group of visitors who have discovered a home away from home, a place with familiar names and words. Generous gifts from local business and community leaders made the center possible, and it opened its doors on the first floor of the Brown Building in 1996.

The room's architecture is based on Islamic design and also incorporates an inviting touch of Texas earth tones. Rich draperies of blue, gold, and maroon adorn the main entry, and these tones, along with rich woodwork continue throughout the center. When Tropical Storm Allison hit in the summer of 2001, the Brown Building and the Muslim Prayer Center were among the hardest hit. The Prayer Center was closed temporarily along with the rest of the building, but it did not take long for community members to have it up and running again.³ The Muslim Prayer Center is a vital component of the Medical Center's Muslim and spiritual network. As a part of the spiritual foun-

dation of the Medical Center, it sends a clear message that all are welcome here.

The Freeman-Dunn Sanctuary— M. D. Anderson Cancer Center



*Freeman-Dunn Sanctuary, M. D. Anderson Cancer Center.
Courtesy The University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center*

When the M. D. Anderson Cancer Center opened its doors in 1954, there was not a chapel in the building. Since it was considered a research center and school, as well as a hospital, space was just too scarce. In the early 1970s, the Lutheran Hospital Association decided that rather than build their own hospital, a pavilion and chapel for the world famous Cancer Center would be developed.⁴ The chapel and pavilion were completely funded by private donations and loans, both from individuals, like John Freeman and John Dunn, and organizations such as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The result is a beautiful multi-denominational chapel off of the Rose Pavilion, across from the cafeteria.

The chapel is set up in a unique formation with the entrance on one corner, the three remaining corners being comprised of intricate stained glass panels that bring sunlight in from outside. Although the pulpit is in one corner of the room, near one of the stained glass windows, the center of the room holds a podium on a

raised platform with symbols of many religions etched on each side. On the far wall, opposite the entry, is a raised wood relief. At first glance, it is merely decorative artwork, but a closer inspection reveals a detailed scene of Noah's Ark, a dove carrying an olive branch, and a rainbow. This scene relays perfectly the messages of this room: Hope and Endurance. Never give up.

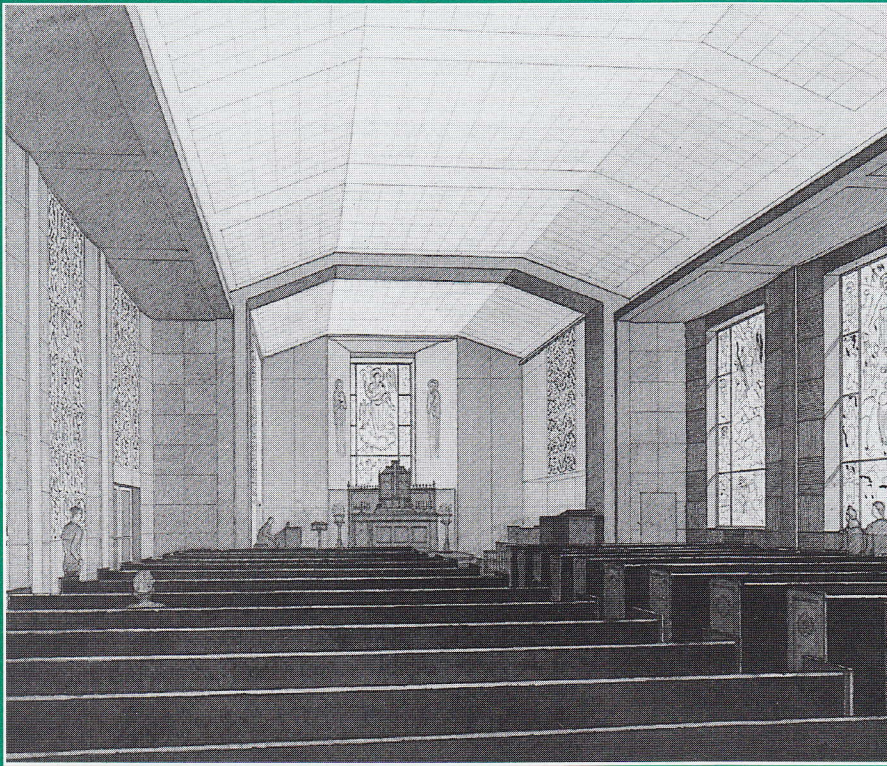
This chapel is truly impressive, both in its grandeur and in its subtlety. Although it is close to the cafeteria, the foyer that leads to the chapel muffles all outside noise, making it a perfectly peaceful place. The atmosphere is one of acceptance and tolerance. Many patients at M. D. Anderson are too ill to make it down to the chapel, but still desire a quiet place of contemplation. These are provided throughout the hospital in the form of small prayer and meditation rooms. Each room can comfortably accommodate one or two people, but this is enough to feel the prompting of the spirit and continue the healing process. The hospital also has a Muslim prayer

room and a pediatric spirituality center. There is no question that medicine and spirituality have joined forces in the healing process at the M. D. Anderson Cancer Center.

Wiess Memorial Chapel— The Methodist Hospital

Many visitors who come to this hospital remember only one thing about the building: the chapel. It is located off the main entrance in the Dunn Lobby. This is a chapel that really looks like a chapel. Separated from the everyday business of the hospital by a small foyer, its beauty and reverence reach out to you before you even open the wood paneled doors. Upon entering your eyes are immediately drawn to the focal point of the room, a large exquisitely detailed stained glass window depicting Christ, with palms upwards. It is not until you have sufficiently drunk in the beauty of this window that you notice the other aspects of the room.

Just below this stained glass window is an exquisite pipe organ. On the right side



Wiess Memorial Chapel, Methodist Hospital.

Courtesy McGovern Historical Collections, Houston Academy of Medicine-Texas Medical Center Library

of the room, four more stained glass panels grace the walls, each depicting a saint or biblical scene. Additionally, many of the panels contain symbols of other religions, announcing that all are welcome in this place of worship. All of the chapel accoutrements are here: the pulpit, the niches, and the alcoves. This is the kind of chapel that invites brides to walk down the aisle, and indeed many have. The Wiess Chapel makes it easy to remember that life goes on, in spite of the pains and heartaches that bring us to the hospital in the first place. As a stepping stone along the footpath of faith, this is a stronghold.

Cullen Memorial Chapel— St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital

Like the hospital itself, the chapel at St. Luke's is a statement of simplicity and devotion. It is nestled in a corner near the Bertner Street entrance and approached through a quiet reception area. Since it is not directly off the main lobby of the hospital, it is not surrounded by the ambient noises that take place there: families coming and going, volunteers giving directions, the buzz of hurried conversations. The chapel's reception area consists of many overstuffed chairs and an unspoken

invitation to "sit and think a while."

The chapel itself has an understated beauty. The hospital opened in 1954, and the chapel has been a mainstay of the hospital community since that time. The

dedicatory plaque reminds us of the benevolence of one of Texas' great philanthropists, Hugh Roy Cullen. The plaque dedicates the chapel "To the glory of God and in memory of Roy Gustav Cullen." Roy Gustav was the only son of Hugh Roy and his wife Lillie. He died tragically in an oil refinery fire in 1936 at the age of 31.⁵ Hugh Roy Cullen made his fortune as a Texas oil wildcatter and it is fitting that this dedication, and the many others that he has made in the name of his son, reminds all where Texas first made its millions, and first lost its native sons. The Cullen's loving presence and sense of family shine through this magnificent chapel.

The chapel is decorated in a somewhat contemporary theme, but its purpose and function are clear. The alcove and pulpit areas are the focus of the room, adorned with a large cross behind an elegant, but simple stand that holds an oversized Bible. The room is graced with a baby grand piano, and white hymnals dot the velvet-covered chairs. Throughout the room are symbols of most major religions, and a stand near the door provides written prayers and devotionals of every faith. Visitors are invited to sit or kneel and there are no time limits imposed—faith, hope, and tears cannot be measured by a stopwatch.



Cullen Memorial Chapel. Courtesy St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital



Chabad House. Courtesy Chabad at Texas Medical Center

Chabad House—Texas Medical Center

Although technically not within the boundaries of the Medical Center, it would be remiss to omit the Chabad House at the Texas Medical Center and the services it offers to the Jewish community. The word "Chabad" is a Hebrew acronym for the three intellectual faculties of: *chachmah*-wisdom, *binah*-comprehension, and *de'at*-knowledge.⁶ In 1992, Rabbi Lazer and Rochel Lazaroff saw a need for closer access to Chabad by patients and staff at the Texas Medical Center and the house was opened to meet that need. Located a stones throw from the Medical Center on University Boulevard, the Chabad House is not only a place of worship, but is also a haven for study and discussion. The house invites Jews and non-Jews to learn more about faith and hope in times of despair.

Ben Taub Memorial Chapel— Ben Taub General Hospital

Ben Taub has a reputation in Houston as the best ER in town, and most people who see it for the first time enter through the emergency room doors. For this reason, the chapel often gets overlooked until the adrenaline rush of the emergency is over. The chapel, located just behind the reception desk in the main lobby, is a quiet, simple place. It is a comfortable, humble, clearly non-denominational room, without any pretensions. The floors are tile and the chairs resemble those found in any standard waiting room, but the spirit of the place is unmistakable. At the back of the room, on the wall that connects

with the lobby outside are several stained glass panels. These panels are in simple earth tones, in waves and arches, without harsh corners or bold intrusions. The only religious symbol in the room is near the front of the chapel. It is a small statue of Jesus, holding a lamb and feeding several sheep. Near the door a stand holds many pamphlets and religious study guides.

Many have found this room in the early mornings, after long nights spent in the emergency room, hoping and praying that their loved ones would be alright. One such woman related her story of

being overcome with grief, not just for her son's physical ailments as he lay in intensive care, but for his spiritual well being in the wake of the incident, which placed him in that position.⁷ As she wandered the halls of the hospital, this unassuming room drew her in. Finding a chapel in a hospital such as Ben Taub, where life and death are commonly traded, gave her the strength she needed for the next round of battles. "I have been to other hospital chapels in the past but none has touched me in my hour of need the way this one has. It has no false front, no bravado, just the pure love of God." This woman, like many others, was able to recognize this chapel as an important part of the spiritual path of healing.

The VA Chapel—Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center

In 1991, the Veterans Affairs Medical Center opened the doors of its new state-of-the-art facility, and began the process of tearing down the old, WWII-era hospital that had previously handled the needs of veterans for over fifty years.⁸ Some of the things that were saved from the old building and transferred to the new are the stained glass panels that adorn the walls of the chapel. They were not in the best of shape. Fifty years of dust and dirt had taken their toll, but in April of 1999, the new chapel was dedicated and the stained glass windows, now restored to their former state of grace and beauty, were included in that dedication. The six stained glass panels, each with symbols and repre-

sentations of the different branches of the military and of many different religions, rise above the podium. There are three on each side rising in increments to the vaulted ceiling as they near the center point. There is a seventh window on the wall to the right of the entrance displaying the flag of the medical corps.

The ambiance of the VA hospital is unique among those in the Medical Center. It is a place of lifetime medical treatment, where veterans return time after time on a regular basis, for hospitalization as well as basic medical care. This difference is reflected in the overall atmosphere of the hospital. It is not a quiet place, with a serene lobby and a few people sitting around waiting to visit a loved one. It is a place of constant action. The revolving doors into the front lobby seldom stop, and the noise level in the lobby is usually a few decibels higher than the average playground; it is an upbeat place. The chapel reflects this atmosphere in a pleasant and unobtrusive manner. Located on the second floor, near the main elevators and a large seating area, the doors to the chapel are seldom closed and the hall is seldom quiet. Hospital workers as well as patrons come and go on a regular basis, bowing their heads for a few minutes, kneeling in prayer, then it is up and on the go again. The evenings are much quieter, and many patients find the chapel more inviting when there is less hustle and bustle. Day or night, the chapel is a central part of the existence of the hospital.

W.T. Moran Chapel—The Institute for Rehabilitation and Research (TIRR)

Since its inception in the early 1950s, TIRR has been on the forefront of medical treatment and rehabilitation for the disabled community. As with many older hospitals, it spent its first few decades without a chapel or a chaplaincy program. The patients and staff depended entirely on visits from spiritual leaders in the community, and the only place to find a quiet spot for prayer and meditation was an empty corner of the cafeteria. On January 8, 1998, that changed with the dedication of the W.T. Moran Chapel.

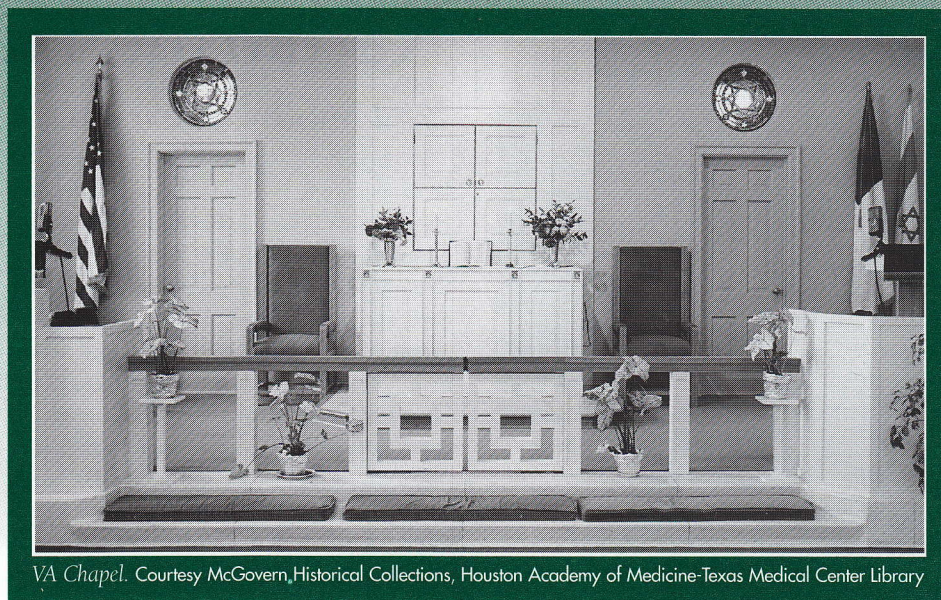
The Morans are another example of great Texas oilmen who have noted a need in the community and met it with donations of funds that make chapels such as

this a reality. The room is a small, but comfortable sanctuary nestled on a side hallway between the front desk and the rehab and physical therapy room. TIRR, by its very nature, is a different kind of hospital than most in the Medical Center. Patients who come here generally have experienced a sudden, life changing event and most are in for a lengthy stay. The chapel here, more than at many other hospitals, has become a refuge for many as they seek to come to terms with the hand that life has dealt them. There are many steps to recovering from a spinal cord or brain injury, not the least of which is coming to terms with what has happened and being prepared to discover a new way to live your life. Having a chapel at TIRR has provided not only a spot for personal meditation, but also a sense of normalcy in lives that have suddenly been turned upside down.

The doors to the chapel, like all the doors at TIRR, open extra wide and all the furniture inside is moveable. This is a place that knows how to accommodate wheelchair and bed ridden patients, and the chapel is very accessible. The only decoration in the chapel is found behind the podium: a small stained glass panel with an impressionist design and shape. A small cart in the back of the room holds bibles and other religious materials. Missing are any sharp angles or tight corners. Since many of the patients in the hospital are in for an extended and tumultuous stay, Reverend Charles E. Brown, interim director of Chaplain Services, puts a special emphasis on routine in the chapel.⁹ Every Sunday a minister or religious leader from the community is invited to conduct a service, and usually a choir or an ensemble perform as well. The silent and spoken words in this room are re-affirming for those who visit. From the quadriplegic who gives thanks that today he moved a finger, to the therapist who gives thanks for every step a patient takes, the presence of this chapel reminds us all that life does go on.

A Few Pebbles on the Path

Clergy by the hundreds visit the Texas Medical Center. Most of them come with a specific goal in mind, a specific patient to meet, but many spend countless additional hours aiding hospital chaplains in visiting those who request in-room visits.



VA Chapel. Courtesy McGovern Historical Collections, Houston Academy of Medicine-Texas Medical Center Library

Many drive for miles to tend to the needs of their flocks and always feel refreshed by the journey. The Reverend R.A. Etzel oversees a medium-sized flock in Centerville, Texas, which is about midway between Houston and Dallas.¹⁰ Usually the church's members go to local hospitals, but when a serious need arises they are often sent to the Texas Medical Center. Reverend Etzel notes: "Hospital doctors and nurses have a great understanding of how important spiritual healing is to the injured and I have always felt welcomed and appreciated by them and by the hospital chaplains as well. I know I can depend on the hospital chaplains to be there for my parishioners when I cannot be and that gives great comfort." Most visiting chaplains are aware of the chapels in the Medical Center and the Institute for Religion and Health, but have visited only one or two. They can most often be found in waiting rooms with anxious family members, or in quiet conversation at a patient's bedside.

The issue of ethics is not an easy one in our day of technological advances. For this reason, ethics and ethicists have become partners of sort with the many chaplains in the Medical Center. M. D. Anderson Cancer Center and many of the other hospitals have ethicists on staff whose job is to help patients and physicians weigh the moral and spiritual values of life changing decisions.

Not all of the hospitals in the Texas Medical Center have chapels and prayer rooms, but they all have chaplains and/or

chaplaincy services. Harris County Psychiatric Center, which by its very nature cannot have private prayer or meditation rooms, has two chaplains on staff. They conduct services in the public areas of the hospital, and spend a great deal of time counseling patients and family. The Shriners Children's Hospital is another that does not have a chapel, but that by no means is an indication of the lack of spirituality within its walls. Most of Shriners' patients are seen on an outpatient basis, and those that do stay in the hospital are surrounded by the very essence of what the Shriners stand for: help and healing without limitations.

When the rain that Longfellow predicted falls into the lives of many, they find help and comfort on the footpath of faith of the Texas Medical Center. Whether it be in the shape of a chapel, a silent place of prayer and meditation, or a visit from the clergy, the necessity of spirituality in healing is clear. It is an essential part of the process of life, and these oases of peace provide a way for patients, family, and staff of the Medical Center to make it one day and one step at a time. Behind every doctor, nurse, and medical technician are spiritual edifices and representatives of peace, hope, reflection, and most of all, healing. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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