

Ambulance chaplains

Ambulance chaplains volunteer their time providing confidential and individual spiritual counselling, pastoral care and assistance to our employees, patients and their families 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Chaplains are called out to the same incidents that paramedics attend and are also exposed to the difficult side of the job, ie. patient grief, trauma and death. We asked three chaplains what they do to help when on scene and who helps them when they need support?

Father Andrew Doohan FORSTER

WITH AMBULANCE?

On and off since July 2007.

YOUR BACKGROUND?

My background before ministry was in banking and finance. It was only during and after my ministry training that I came into contact with the kind of work (chaplains within a hospital setting) that ultimately brought me to Ambulance. In addition to Ambulance, I am also a chaplain with St John Ambulance.

WHAT'S THE FIRST THING YOU DO WHEN YOU ARRIVE ON SCENE?

The first thing I like to do is to get some idea – even if sketchy – of what's happened and who has been impacted. That allows me to then prioritise who might need my attention first. It's always good to have some idea of what's happened before speaking with anyone.

HOW DO YOU HELP SOMEONE WHO'S GOING THROUGH A MOMENT OF CRISIS?

Often the most important and effective part of helping someone experiencing crisis is simply by being there; offering a physical presence of someone who is prepared to listen or just to sit with them or let them give voice to how they are experiencing the situation.

WHAT IF THE PERSON IN NEED HAS NO ACKNOWLEDGED FAITH?

The faith of a person experiencing crisis is ultimately irrelevant. They are human beings experiencing human emotions and being humanly



vulnerable. Whether someone has faith or not – or indeed is able to name that faith – doesn't change the way I approach them. My faith, however, motivates everything I do in that situation, and if the person wants to explicitly speak about a faith dimension to what they're experiencing I am happy to do so.

HOW HAVE YOU DEALT WITH THE DIFFICULT SIDE OF THE JOB? HAVE THESE EXPERIENCES EVER MADE YOU QUESTION YOUR OWN FAITH?

Like most people who work in this field, there are the 'side effects' of being exposed to trauma, death and grief. Thankfully my faith is a large means by which I am able to live with the exposure to such things. In addition, I have the resources of other chaplains, other colleagues in ministry and professional resources (such as supervision) to also assist me.

I don't have a problem personally with questioning my faith – I do it all the time. It's part of the process of trying to make sense of our experiences in the light of faith to be open to questions.

Reverend Chris Little ALBURY

WITH AMBULANCE?

About eight years.

YOUR BACKGROUND?

I've worked in ministry for 20 years in Lithgow, Sydney and now Albury. I work in an independent church, but previously worked in Anglican churches. In the past, I also worked in university student ministry. I've not been a chaplain anywhere else other than Ambulance, although I'm a member of the local RFS Brigade.

WHAT'S THE FIRST THING YOU DO WHEN YOU ARRIVE ON SCENE?

I want to find out what's going on and who's there. The early priority is to find Ambulance staff and simply ask, 'How are you?' I don't want to get in the way, but do need to show I'm there to support. What happens next varies and I rely on the advice of Ambulance staff at this point. Perhaps I'll spend time with a paramedic or member of the public, or touch base with other emergency service people at the scene or sit with a grieving family member.

WHAT IF THE PERSON IN NEED HAS NO ACKNOWLEDGED FAITH?

In the immediate and urgent phase of a scene, a person's faith is irrelevant. I am one part of a group trying to help people in crisis. As chaplain, I am at a scene as someone who trusts God, so I offer to pray for people. But on scene is not the time to have deep and meaningful conversations. After



the crisis phase there's more time to discuss a person's faith, if they want to. Most conversations about God have been between jobs, at the station, in a social event or with a pre-arranged follow-up visit.

HOW HAVE YOU DEALT WITH THE DIFFICULT SIDE OF THE JOB? HAVE THESE EXPERIENCES EVER MADE YOU QUESTION YOUR OWN FAITH?

For me, suffering is not an intellectual problem. The problem is that suffering is hard - watching pain, sitting with grief, not knowing what to say. There are many helps for me, including prayer, talking about what troubles me, getting good exercise, time with my family and being disciplined to have days off.

APART FROM YOUR FAITH, WHO HELPS YOU WHEN YOU NEED SUPPORT?

My family and church are really important for support. I can talk through issues if I want to. If I don't want to talk, I can enjoy the rest of life. I also have long-term friends I can call on. Even if we haven't spoken for a while, we understand how to listen and talk to one another. I find bike riding clears my head of many worries. Sometimes I want to ride solo; sometimes I need to go with a group of friends.

A general help for me is thankfulness. There are so many gifts in the world, so I try to be thankful for good food, a beautiful sunrise, my kids' sense of humour - anything. This doesn't get rid of problems, but puts them in better perspective.

" Their faith is not really an issue, it's my faith that's critical. The other person simply needs to know I care and they can tell me anything without judgement and that I'll listen. "

**Captain Lyn Cathcart
Tweed Heads**

WITH AMBULANCE?

For six years

YOUR BACKGROUND?

I've been a Salvation Army officer for almost 14 years. I've been involved in chaplaincy for the Rural Fire Service, disaster centres, and unofficially with the courts and a RSL sub branch. Before full time ministry, I owned a small electronics retail shop. I have two daughters and three grandchildren.

WHAT'S THE FIRST THING YOU DO WHEN YOU ARRIVE ON SCENE?

Before I arrive at the scene I pray for wisdom. On arrival, I first check in with the paramedics, then I simply linger where they tell me the need is the greatest, either for the patients, family bystanders or paramedics.

WHAT IF THE PERSON IN NEED HAS NO ACKNOWLEDGED FAITH?

Their faith is not really an issue, it's my faith that's critical. The other person simply needs to know I care and they can tell me anything without judgement and that I'll listen. Sometimes I share how my faith helps me. I can and do offer practical help where needed, but mostly it's about sitting with them and listening.



HOW HAVE YOU DEALT WITH THE DIFFICULT SIDE OF THE JOB? HAVE THESE EXPERIENCES EVER MADE YOU QUESTION YOUR OWN FAITH?

For me the crisis, grief, trauma strengthens my faith. It makes me wonder how people without faith possibly survive. Tragically it's often the totally innocent who suffer, but my faith reassures me that none of it goes unnoticed and that somehow somewhere God will restore and heal and bring about justice. This gives me hope and a certain amount of reassurance that all is not in vain.

APART FROM YOUR FAITH, WHO HELPS YOU WHEN YOU NEED SUPPORT?

I have a good support structure with my two adult daughters and other minister friends. I also engage professional supervision on a regular basis.

And I have a dog that will always love me and offers unconditional support - it's no accident that dog is 'God' spelt backwards!