**“We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.” –Romans 12: 5-6 (NRSV)**

When I read Romans 12: 5-6, I am reminded of the work I began as Community Advocate in the Carlisle community six years ago as an ordained United Church of Christ minister. Based on my Clinical Pastoral Education programs at Eastern Mennonite Seminary (Chaplain Internship) and Milton S. Hershey Medical Center (Chaplain Residency), I follow the practice of “going where I am “asked/called/invited” to come and accompany—“sit with” residents, patients, family members and/or staff who request a chaplain to listen to whatever “concern” was causing them anxiety, uncertainty, or the need to “just” have someone to listen to their concerns about the situations that brought them to the residential community or hospital for care.

During those two years, I never had the same request or situation occur. Every situation was different. And, as chaplain, I soon recognized that my role was to “minister” to each person individually—each had different needs. Somewhere along the way, I realized that what I was experiencing—learning as a chaplain--was a **“gift”**--**the recognition** there is no one way to “minister” because each person experiences pain, trauma, grief in many different ways. So, I decided to take a different route than the traditional chaplain working in a residential community, hospital, prison—to a chaplain serving in the community as a chaplain for individuals needing someone to accompany—“sit with” them as residents, patients, family members and staff—and listen to their stories—without judgement.

And, so began my volunteer position as “Community Chaplain” at First United Church of Christ. The trust and faith that my church had—and—continues to have—for me to do this “ministry” in Carlisle, I will never forget. Consistory members, and both past and current pastors listened to me, read my monthly reports, prayed, and understood my journey from “community chaplain” to “chaplain advocate.”

Over the years, my “ministry” beginning with individual “telephone calls” asking if I could help, later became “telephone and email calls” from local agency representatives who identified my role as an “affiliate” (outside the agency) rather than a “team member” (inside the agency). No matter the distinction, I was invited— “called” to assist the agency. As time moved forward, I received invitations to serve as a “member” on community boards. I became a welcomed visitor by business employees, and as an advocate of agencies that provided support services for the hungry, homeless, addicted, mentally ill, and families raising grandchildren.

I chose to volunteer as a community chaplain because I believed there IS a need for a chaplain outside hospitals, nursing homes, hospices, prisons, clinics, etc. because there are so many people who need someone to listen and to be with them as they experience hardship with no one to help them navigate the chopping, stormy sea of life situations where they find themselves.

This Fall, I now serve as President of Kiwanis Carlisle – an organization I was introduced to at a Project Share Farm Stand event the first year of my community chaplaincy. I am in my sixth (second term) of Maranatha’s – Carlisle Board – an agency I was recommended to from Samaritan Fellowship. Last year, I was invited to serve on the local NAMI Board. I am an affiliate of the treatment courts (drug and mental health courts), and work with community organizations including the Carlisle Area Religious Council (CARC).

Obviously, COVID-19 has limited in-person group meetings—so I am now part of ZOOM meetings—often occurring weekly. And, I am now at the point (because of my varied roles in community organizations) where I need to attend as both a participant and host of ZOOM meetings.

I always appreciate sharing reports with Consistory because of the opportunity to describe how “ministry” extends to the community—from “inside the church” to those “outside the church walls.” Without community chaplains, churches remain unaware of the extent individuals suffer; and how social services and other community agencies struggle to meet the needs of the many individuals and families.

To conclude, there is no doubt that COVID-19 has increased the pressure on the community—there are no exceptions to the pandemic’s intensity—everyone is stressed by its presence and pressures. Every day, I realize the “steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; that they are new every morning. (Lamentations 3: 22-23—NRSV).

“To the Glory of God, we serve.”

Chaplain Donna