

31 July 2018

Priest calls time on Waitemata DHB chaplaincy role at 91

Catholic priest Father Martin Bugler is winding down his chaplaincy duties at Auckland's North Shore Hospital and easing himself into retirement at the age of 91.

Father Martin, who has just celebrated the 60th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood, immigrated to New Zealand from Ireland in 1958 and has worked in multiple parishes between Hamilton and Dargaville.

He is a long-time supporter of Waitemata DHB's chaplaincy service and frequently assists with pastoral care on the wards of North Shore Hospital – as well as the neighbouring North Shore Hospice.

But a recent shift to St John Vianney House – a retirement home for Catholic clergy – signals a definite change in pace.

“Retirement for priests, as for many others, is somewhat of a gradual process,” Fr Martin says. “But I must happily accept that I am into the final stage of my journey here below. We retired priests and the Sisters who care for us lead a prayerful and somewhat contemplative life and our daily Mass is the mainspring of each day.”

Waitemata DHB has three chaplains based at North Shore Hospital, one in Waitakere and two at its Mason Clinic Regional Forensic Psychiatric Service in Pt Chevalier.

It also has 40 volunteer chaplaincy assistants across its three main sites - supporting people of all faiths and spiritualities, as well as those with no particular religious beliefs.

There were around 17,770 chaplaincy visits to patients across the DHB in 2017. In addition, there was a total of 2854 visits to families and 5087 to staff.

Father Martin says the role is challenging in a particularly sensitive environment.

It's also motivational – even to a man with six decades of priestly service to his credit.

“Many instances remain clear in my memory as having been especially moving,” he says. “I remember one call to North Shore Hospital where a number of family members were gathered around the bed of a man who was dying.

“No one gave any sign that they expected anything of me and there were many minutes of mostly silence.

“But my waiting paid off when the patient finally looked at me, trustingly, and said: ‘can you pray for me and with me’. It was a moment when I thanked God for slowing me down.

“I think the chaplain often wonders if he or she could have done better. However, I'm grateful for the learning curve North Shore Hospital gave me to grow in sensitivity.

“Clearly, society has become increasingly secular - and prayer and sacraments are a foreign world to many. When sickness, dying and death come, I feel chaplains and their ministry are appreciated, perhaps now more than ever - helping people in unfamiliar territory.”

The DHB opened the Ahurewa Spiritual Centre at North Shore Hospital in 2015 and is about to expand and upgrade its chapel at Waitakere Hospital in West Auckland.

Ahurewa caters for people of all faiths and includes the Chapel of St Luke, a prayer room, chaplaincy offices and quiet spaces for patients and their families.

Father Martin attended the first Mass held in the chapel and says the centre is a credit to the DHB.

“I wonder if it can be equalled anywhere in NZ,” he says. “The spiritual centre must surely be a comfort and support to many patients, just as it is conducive to close co-operation between all the chaplaincy staff.”

Waitemata DHB gave Father Martin a certificate of appreciation this month and CEO Dr Dale Bramley says his input will be sorely missed.

“The development of spiritual centres at both of our hospitals, combined with the work of our chaplaincy and cultural health services, shows our commitment to cater, not only for people’s physical welfare, but also for their mental and spiritual wellbeing. It also helps us provide a better work environment for our staff.

“Father Martin has been unwavering in his service of the sick and has always been available to visit and administer services to those who have requested a priest.

“His graciousness, humility and empathy have not gone unnoticed and our DHB thanks him for his many years of chaplaincy service to both patients and staff.

Ends.

Caption 1: Father Martin Bugler.

Caption 2: Waitemata DHB CEO Dr Dale Bramley pictured during the opening of the Ahurewa Spiritual Centre at North Shore Hospital in 2015.

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