

Gospel Opportunity: Hospital Chaplains Report Uptick in Questions About Eternity

Former Desert Storm veteran Rocky Walker calls himself the “COVID chaplain.” He has worked for years with heart patients at Manhattan’s Mount Sinai Hospital, but now he’s working in a “COVID-only” unit with patients who, for the most part, are intubated or sometimes not even conscious. Their family members can’t visit.

Walker is used to death on the battlefield and even in hospital settings, but the intensity of the new normal right now is entirely different. Constantly wearing a mask, he finds it difficult to express the empathy that those around him need. His unit recently lost a nurse.

“This is a nurse that has been with us for 21 years and what do you say to that? I didn’t have any words for that. I was fighting back my own tears,” he said.

Like every health care chaplain in the country, Walker’s job has changed dramatically. He’s now typically separated from patients and their loved ones and that is forcing him to connect in new ways.

Cathy Disher is a Southern Baptist chaplain who works with cancer patients in critical care at the James Cancer Hospital. Prior to the crisis, most of her patients were intubated and sedated, so she would focus on their families. Now with visiting restrictions in place, she’s connecting primarily by phone. Disher says families welcome the call.

“Families are often looking for some conversations, to let them say what they would like to say,” said Disher. “Someone just to chat with. Someone just to share their concerns, to

offer them emotional support.”

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