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Homes cater to residents' spiritual needs at crucial time of life



A grey area: The challenges of long-term care in Manitoba

By: [John Longhurst](#)

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When Renata Cook's 90-year-old father needed to be placed in a personal care home, there was only one choice: the Holy Family Home in the North End.

It wasn't just because of the dedicated and compassionate staff at Holy Family, which is owned and operated by the Sisters Servants of Mary Immaculate. It was also because of the deep commitment the home has to the spiritual care of its residents.

"It was so important to have someone available to talk to about his spiritual questions," said Cook of the spiritual care team at Holy Family. "It's a place that feels safe for him physically, emotionally and spiritually... God's love is evident there."



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Holy Family Home spiritual advisor Michelle Thiessen: 'It's more than a job. It's a calling.'

Michelle Thiessen leads the spiritual care team at Holy Family, located at 165 Aberdeen Ave. "It's an honour to serve the residents in this way," she said. "It's more than a job. It's a calling."

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Through her work, Thiessen focuses on the spiritual needs of residents by talking with them about issues like loneliness, grief, loss, health problems and facing the end of their lives.

"It's part of our holistic care," Thiessen said, noting she is part of the larger team at Holy Family. "We don't only care for bodies, but we also care for spirits — everyone, whether they are religious or not, has a spirit, and is interested in the meaning of their lives."

Thiessen organizes chapel services and ensures that residents who can't leave their rooms get communion. She arranges for spirituality groups where people can talk, share, pray and build community together.

Death is always present, Thiessen observed. "Every resident knows how they are going to leave," she said, adding that it can be tough to say goodbye to people she's grown close to.

At Riverview Health Centre, Chris Salstrom provides spiritual care for personal care home residents and others.

"It's about meeting them at their place of need," she said, adding spiritual care is important in a personal care home since it's a time "when people are reflecting on their lives, on its meaning and purpose."

Salstrom is quick to note that spirituality is not the same as religion. "It's whatever is in someone's heart and soul," she said, adding that religious rituals can be part of it. "Religion is only one part of spiritual health."

For her, it's about looking for God's image in everyone, however that presents itself. "We are all spiritual beings, whether we believe in God or not," she said. "Everyone is a precious child of God."

Through her work, Salstrom is part of the larger team at Riverview, at 1 Morley Ave., that meets weekly to talk about ways to serve residents.

"I offer insights from my perspective, and get insights from others," she said.

Rabbi Matt Leibl provides spiritual care at the Saul and Claribel Simkin Centre, at 1 Falcon Ridge Dr. in Linden Ridge. The work can be "truly uplifting and truly heartbreaking," he said of being with people at the last stage of life.

On the one hand, there is the inspiration that comes from being with people who have experienced or endured so much in their lives, including people who survived the Holocaust. On the other, there is the reality that death is not far away. "It's always in the air," he said.

But being at the centre is about so much more than that, Leibl said.

"It borders on the cliche, but people don't come here to die. They come here to live. I'm here to make sure it is the best possible place where they can be," he said.

"This is a great place to live," Leibl said, acknowledging that many people think a care home is the last place they want to end up.

About his work, Leibl said it's as simple as taking time to stop to talk with a resident. "Being a listener is a powerful spiritual experience... I am a better person, a better rabbi, for having spent time with the residents," he said.

"People need soul care," he said of his work, adding that by feeding their souls, "I am feeding my own soul, too."

Two new dignity shrouds, one bearing a cross and a secular edition, are being used at Fred Douglas Lodge to cover residents as they are wheeled out of the 1275 Burrows Ave. facility for the last time. Employees have an opportunity to line the lobby and say their farewells on every such occasion.

Deer Lodge Centre has its own protocols to support community members and employees who are grieving through semi-regular memorial services and symbolism.

A bouquet of flowers is placed on every vacated bed at 2109 Portage Ave. If the resident who died was a veteran, a flag is also set down in their honour and remains until someone else moves in.

At St. Amant, located at 440 River Rd., Andrew Terhoch provides spiritual care to residents, including those who are elderly. For him, that's part of serving the needs of the whole person.

"It's about helping people to have a nourishing and meaningful experience here," he said. "Everyone is on a journey, not matter what their physical condition might be."

His goal is to tend to people on that journey, whatever stage they are at. "We all need to know ourselves and our place in the world," he said. "We all need to pay attention to the meaning of our lives."

His goal is to help people feel "deeply seen," he said, whether that is by acknowledging their suffering or sharing in their joy.

Gladys Hrabi is the chief executive

officer of the Manitoba Association for Residential and Community Care Homes for Everyone, an organization of 21 mostly faith-based personal care homes.

Spiritual care at those homes is valuable, she said, citing a report by the World Health Organization that says spiritual care is a vital part of end-of-life care.

"It's about the existential issues people face when they are older, about changes in life, changes in their health, about loss and meaning and purpose," she said. "People are asking if they lived their lives well."

Despite its importance, spiritual care hasn't been high on the Manitoba government's agenda over the last few years, Hrabi said.

This wasn't always the case. In 2012, the then-NDP government launched a spiritual health-care strategic plan in co-operation with the Manitoba Multifaith Council. That plan promised to enhance awareness of, and give direction to, spiritual health care.

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The plan — the first in Canada at a provincial level — noted research showing that higher levels of spiritual well-being, along with a sense of inner meaning and inner peace, are associated with better health outcomes, lower levels of depression and anxiety, and a better quality of life.

The plan was shelved in 2017 by the Pallister government, Hrabi said, adding she is hopeful the new NDP government will put it back on the table.

“This is a good time for that to happen,” she said, noting the premier’s interest in spirituality. “We are open to further conversations about it.”

— with files from Maggie Macintosh

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John Longhurst

Faith reporter  

John Longhurst has been writing for Winnipeg's faith pages since 2003. He also writes for Religion News Service in the U.S., and blogs about the media, marketing and communications at Making the News.

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