

Pastor Ron Bestvater's Biography

My primary calling since 2007 has been to Hospital Ministry in Saskatoon. Prior calls include, team ministries in Edmonton and Oshawa after Seminary at LTS (Lutheran Theological Seminary) in Saskatoon rural ministry centered in Assiniboia and Weyburn teaching and chaplaincy in education ministry at LCBI (Lutheran Collegiate Bible Institute) High School extensive interim ministries and vice pastorates all over Saskatchewan. Along the way I've worked in youth ministry, camp ministry, conflict resolution, social services advocacy, foster parenting, and house renovations! Amazing how the Lord has been working out my salvation.... Hospital ministry only gradually became my primary calling, via many steps along the way. I made my first hospital visits as the teenager on the visitation team in my home congregation of St. Mark's, Kingston, all on the basis of a week-long hospitalization as a young adolescent and tagging along with Dad and Mom to visit relatives and friends in various hospitals as a child. I looked through the window of a secure psychiatric room door at a fellow worshipper suspended between two chairs as the resident told me, "He's been like that for a week." I resolved to pray for him every day, and the following week we were able to visit in a patient meeting area, just for a few minutes. God answers prayer!

Ambulances and other Emergency services were introduced into my life through high school sports, although I personally only needed a dentist to repair my hockey mouth and my family doctor to give me a whoopie cushion when a really big check landed me on my tailbone. Only as an adult am I beginning to learn how serious the six or seven concussions really were that I managed to play through... God heals!

In my second year at Queen's University, I contracted H1N2 and was delirious and incapacitated in my attic student room for many days before one of the nursing students from my church found me and got me on my feet again. I think that might be when I learned that God intervenes through nurses and uses doctors to extend Jesus' healing.

While working in Youth ministry in Toronto, I learned how important hospital visitors are to us when we are sick. My billet's doctor put me in Sunnybrook for a contagious bronchial infection: alone, away from home, I had a Gideon's bible in the bedside drawer, time to pray, and a nurse who brought me the phone twice. The very first call was from Harry, whose CP kept him wheelchair-bound but didn't stop him from dropping in at Mississauga Square One Christian Centre, where he and I became friends over lunch. God sends people to show how much He cares!

When Lutheran Theological Seminary accepted me for theological studies and Diane Baxendale accepted my proposal to be her husband, I had no idea how much hospitals would be part of both life-changing developments. Hospital work became my first paying gig, as a fellow who introduced himself as Gene Grant recruited me to cover his chapel services at the Sunset Home while he did his hospital visits and then signed me up to do hospital chapel services twice a month. Hospital ministry even snuck into my first ministry job here in Saskatchewan, when I had to make an emergency trip to the local hospital from the bible camp with the Camp Director.

Because we lived in the Ave M block of 22nd St., my congregational field placement included weekly visitation at St. Paul's hospital. I got called late at night to baptize a baby; I was introduced by the "church patient" to his roommate and spent the next twelve weeks involved in intense faith conversations with him as he faced repeated amputations; and then with my wife pregnant with our first child I was assigned to the NICU for my Clinical Pastoral Education. I learned so much about the miracle of life and the power of grace and the love of God just because my newborn son had ten fingers and a complete nose. He was born at St. Joseph's in Hamilton, where one of the Sisters summarized my role and humbled my attitude: "Son, you're young. You have more energy than us old folk, but we know more than you. So just go and do what you can and leave the rest to God. But don't forget: that leaves him an awful lot to do."

Later, back at seminary and learning a bit about "humour therapy" for hospital ministry, I could laugh at my self-importance and give thanks for that woman's wise words. The weekly visits to that hospital required by

my internship supervisor at St John's taught me the value of helpless presence and its mutually beneficial impact. I was visiting a man whose galloping MS had ended his marriage, left him completely isolated from his family, and whose love radiated to me every time I stood over his bed and looked into his face to pray with him. God knows our hearts...

I learned how important a pastor's hospital visit is when I was admitted at five years old to Hotel Dieu for tonsillitis. My pastor must have prayed with us, because I still have my tonsils. Then just as I was about to graduate from seminary, a tumour was discovered on my thyroid. Before surgery, the hospital chaplain visited and prayed and brought calm and peace to the turmoil caused by unsuccessful efforts to put a gastro-nasal tube through my hockey-battered sinuses. When I asked the surgeon if we could pray before he started, he replied "Already prayed. Never cut anyone without praying!" His bedside manner was no better when he explained after I came to that "you won't be needing any chemotherapy. Quite unusual." He added, "that kind of tumour in that place. That's probably why it was benign. Two inches either way and I would have been bringing a very different message." It gave my life insurance agents fits for years after, but we worked things out. God is a daring teacher

In my first call at Holy Spirit, the ICU social worker taught me how important my calling and collar are. "We're a team," she said. "You can go places I can't, and then you can tell me how I can help. So make sure you get their permission for me to see them when you leave!" Because of her I never felt lost in the vast systems of those huge hospitals, and because of the congregation's love and prayers I never felt overwhelmed by the agonizing health concerns experienced by some of the youth and young adults in my ministry. God helps and blesses those who seek to help and bless others! Does God make referrals?

In Oshawa I began to witness the community dynamics of health and healing, saw the darker side of the politics of health in this country, and rejoiced in the pure wonder of a congregation devoting its energies and its ministries to personal and community healing. Our "Bright Valley of Love" was twelve stories high, right across the street from the Durham Regional Police Station and lock-up... and my well-worn path went from Faith Place to the Oshawa General Hospital, visiting residents of the building, children from the day care, and families from the (neighbour) hood. Yes, God sends...

In Assiniboia, I became the town hospital chaplain, as nurses and doctors would call us "local clergy" on the "ministerial pager" to help with "pastoral care." When the health system was reorganized and distant staff were assigned spiritual care roles, the pagers disappeared, but the phone calls didn't stop. I saw how repentance and forgiveness allows miracles of healing to take place in the lives of the very ill, and I had an intern who taught me about the healing of the dying. Good Friday always comes before Easter, always.

In Weyburn, the hospital was right beside the church... At LCBI, I did supply preaching twice a month, and almost every time people asked me to visit someone in the local hospital... and then I experienced a major burn-out, and the relentlessness of self-care required to get health back... and my mother's dementia... and my own second cancer scare... So why was I not surprised when Ev Schumacher called up just after we had resettled for my daughter's schooling in Saskatoon? "We are looking for a chaplain, and we hear you are looking for a job..." She told me after I was hired that Herb Essenberg had cast the deciding vote: "He's blind, but he sees people's character better than any of us, and he said you were OK."

That was over 10 years ago. Since then I've made thousands of visits; been supported by hundreds of volunteers; finished an advanced theological degree; met untold numbers of supporters and friends of this ministry; lived through a third cancer scare; avoided another burn-out because of the courageous planning of a dedicated group of church leaders; lived and worked in an awesome inter-Lutheran, ecumenical, interfaith, and indigenous spiritual workplace; and grown and grown and grown on this journey of healing and grace. God is good, God is so good.