

Barbara Robertson, Chaplain at Vassar Brothers Medical Center

Cabot Peterson
March 29, 2017



Barbara Robertson and the Vassar Brothers Medical Center in Poughkeepsie, NY

It takes a combination of rare qualities to be a chaplain. One must have a belief in God, but outwardly express no religious preference; be able to comfort the non-believer as well as the believer; answer questions about grief, loss and suffering without really having the answer as to why it is their child that is suffering and not someone else's; be able to hear what someone is saying and not just listen to the words; have the ability to discern what are precisely the right words to speak at just the right time; and, finally, know exactly when to sit quietly, saying nothing, while offering comfort with just your presence.

Another thing one needs to understand is that being a chaplain is not the same as being a priest, pastor, rabbi, or imam. Although a chaplain is most often educated in a particular faith – e.g. Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu - their main job and goal is to bring comfort to the sick and suffering and to their family, not to proselytize or convert.

For the past eight years Barbara Robertson has been doing just that, working as a part-time associate chaplain at [Vassar Brothers Medical Center](#) in Poughkeepsie, NY. Barbara has been exposed to people of all faiths and backgrounds, challenging her to find ways within herself and her own set of beliefs to bring aid and comfort to the sick and grieving. This also includes, of course, people who have no particular faith, as well as atheists.

Whatever the situation she is put in, however, Barbara senses the value and importance of what she is doing.

“I like that it’s very real,” said Barbara, “that you talk about things that are real, and that you talk about meaningful things at meaningful moments in people’s lives.”

Barbara’s journey to Vassar began when she was still a student at the [Unification Theological Seminary \(UTS\)](#) in Barrytown when an article she read piqued her interest.

“There was an article in the newspaper about port chaplains,” recalled Barbara. “Those are people that serve in seaports and the people on the boats. I thought, ‘Wow, that’s an interesting job.’ It sounds like you have your faith and you can meet interesting people.”

Encouraged by what she read, Barbara signed up for a [Clinical Pastoral Education \(CPE\)](#) course, which is necessary to become a chaplain. Upon completion of the 100-hour course she received a scholarship and embarked on an internship at Vassar, where she still is today.



Barbara and her husband, Andrew, are the parents of five children - four boys and a girl - ranging in ages from 17 to 6. Later this year they will be celebrating their 20th wedding anniversary.

She is pursuing her goal of becoming a certified chaplain, which requires her to do four units of CPE for a total of 400 hours - 300 in-hospital counseling, 100 in the classroom - and complete her [Master of Divinity](#) coursework, something she plans to do online. Barbara will complete her third CPE unit in May, leaving just one unit to complete.

Although Barbara has her own set of beliefs, she realizes that that is not enough to bring comfort to others who may not share the same faith. She must find other ways to reach people where they are and help them find solace in their own way.

“You’re not a preacher or minister,” explained Barbara, “so you just have to be present to where they are at. The goal is to help them use their own tools to get through their own spiritual or medical or emotional crisis.

“You might be with a Catholic who is very religious and they will have a rosary so I will use that to help them. An atheist wouldn’t have something like that, but they may have people who care about them, and talking to people who care about them makes them feel better, helps them cope. Whoever I’m with I adjust to that so I can be present to them for whatever they need.”

While this may sound difficult, perhaps even incomprehensible to most people, Barbara is able to see the reality of the situation, offering advice and comfort from a practical as well as spiritual perspective, which allows her to focus on the goal that both she and the person - whether the patient or family member - need.

“My own personal theory is that people want to feel joy,” said Barbara. “The quickest way to do that is to go directly through the pain. For example, having a baby. The baby represents the joy, so the best way to get to the joy is to go right through the labor pain. If labor stalls, then you prolong that pain; it takes much longer.”

While she realizes comfort and prayer are things she can offer to ease one’s doubt or suffering, she knows there is no substitute for the healing power of God’s love and wisdom.

One of the best examples of this happened to Barbara when a woman gave birth, but instead of joy she was filled with sorrow, even regret. Barbara spoke of this woman’s experience in a sermon entitled “Receiving the Blessing From God,” she recently gave at the [Mid-Hudson Valley Family Church \(MHVFC\)](#).

The woman, who was infertile, had allowed another woman’s eggs to be implanted in her so she could conceive. The baby’s birth, however, did not provide her with the happiness she may have hoped for. Instead, she felt guilty because her religion forbade her to have such a procedure performed which would allow her to become pregnant.

Understanding that her words would not be enough to offer solace to such a difficult problem, Barbara advised the woman to ask God what he thought, which she did.

“She got the answer directly from God,” said Barbara, “which made her feel so much better. I helped facilitate her to get her own answer, which is really the theory of chaplaincy. The patient already has the answer, they just need somebody to help them get to it.”