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Hands of hospice workers who aid the dying receive a prayerful blessing

By Allan Turner

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At first glance, there was nothing extraordinary about the hands at Wednesday's Houston Hospice blessing service. They were hands, calloused perhaps, with five fingers each. But these, those gathered at the center's Cockrell Chapel insisted, were very special. They were hands in service to God, helping the terminally ill ease into a peaceful death.

The Interfaith Blessing of Hands – the second year of the event – was simple. A double line of nurses and other hospice workers formed as Chaplain Gordon Robertson and volunteer Chaplain Portia Sweet said a quiet prayer, dabbed crocheted prayer cloths in lavender-scented oil and gently swabbed the supplicants' palms hands.

The ritual was short, lasting only 15 minutes, but moving.

"Holy God," Sweet intoned as the last of about 30 hospice workers settled into their seats, "We ask you to bless our use of this oil today. May its fragrance be a symbolic offering of what is pleasing to you. May its texture remind us that the soothing work of our hands is also pleasing to you."

Nothing is more holy, Sweet observed later, "than holding the hand of someone as they transition from this world to the next."

Founded in 1980, Houston Hospice was the first such end-of-life care facility in Houston. Today, headquartered in the old Tudor-style mansion of former Houston Mayor Oscar Holcombe in the Texas Medical Center, the hospice serves residents of 10 area counties.

"This is a big major deal," said licensed vocational nurse Janet Snyder, who was among those attending the first of three Wednesday blessings. "A lot we actually do here is very special work."

"What we do is a calling," added LVN Dinicesar Fitts. "We are here to serve God."

Robertson noted that such blessings of hands have become a tradition in many medical institutions.

"I just wanted to recognize and affirm for our staff, volunteers and family members the work that they are doing with their hands," Robertson said. "So much comes through our hands."

Robertson, a Roman Catholic deacon, described work with the dying and their families as a "gift."

"We receive a gift when other people allow us to care for them," he said. "If you can spend time with a person, just being present, just doing that can let you witness to them. It's just the act of being with another human being. Not that you can change it. Not that you can make it go away. But just to enter into it with them."

While many who attended the services were health care providers, the blessings also extended to staffers who answer telephones, mop and polish, deal with vendors and offer tissue to grieving families. "Blessed be the hands that prepare meals with care and love for others to enjoy," the prayer observed. "Blessed be the hands that guide those who do not know their way."

Robertson said he was struck by the meaning the ceremony holds for hospice workers. "A staff member (who attended last year) told me she kept the little hand-crocheted prayer cloth," he said. "Every morning, she wakes up and uses it in her prayers."

At a previous job in a medical center hospital, Robertson said the blessing was performed with cotton balls, which later were discarded. He said he opted to use the crocheted prayer cloths – technically they are "face scrubbies" purchased online – because they were the product of skilled and caring hands.

Each bore a one-line prayer attached with a safety pin: "May the work of your hands bring good to all the people you touch and the services you provide."

"These are caring holy hands," Sweet told the group, as staff members in the chapel held out and examined their hands. "Look at their veins, the wrinkles. Think of all they have touched, all they have carried. Being there for others is what we're all about."



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Eris Kayne/For the Chronicle

The Rev. Portia Sweet, left, leads a service at the Cockrell chapel of Houston Hospice where she blesses the hands of nurses, doctors and other hospice staff Wednesday, Oct. 29, 2014 in Houston. This is an annual event to honor those who aid the the dying. The process essentially is prayer and rubbing lavender oil on the aforementioned hands.

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