PinnacleHealth’s Spiritual Care Services: Advocates for Advanced Care Planning, Grief Support and Organ and Tissue Donation

“My passion is helping people relieve the burdens that can occur at the end of their lives so that families can relish the memories of their loved ones and grieve in peace,” shares Rev. Dr. Brenda Alton, Supervisor of Spiritual Care Services for PinnacleHealth.

She and her team, comprised of seven staff members and more than 70 volunteers, value Gift of Life’s support of their mission to provide community education in Advanced Care Planning and direct, real time care for grieving families in the clinical setting.

Leading the initiatives for PinnacleHealth’s Faith Community Health Connection (FCHC), Rev. Dr. Alton works closely with ministry leaders from many diverse houses of worship to bridge the gap in the community between faith and health. When the FCHC identified a knowledge deficit in advanced care planning, Rev. Dr. Alton responded by developing community workshops in PinnacleHealth’s five-county service area to address the need.

During these workshops, local experts provide guidance on end-of-life subjects such as funeral planning, powers of attorney, and estate and living will planning. “A routine part of our Advanced Care Planning workshops is a discussion led by a Gift of Life coordinator who explains the need, means and value of saving lives through organ and tissue donation.”

The Spiritual Care Services staff also works with the interdisciplinary care team to support distraught families upon entry to the hospital’s emergency department or intensive care unit. Trained to talk to people about life cycles, they also specialize in connecting families with resources. “When donation is a possibility it’s beautiful to see the support the entire care team, including our Gift of Life partners, give to grieving families at such a sensitive time,” notes Rev. Dr. Alton.

Gift of Life is extremely grateful for the support Rev. Dr. Alton and her staff give to potential donor families as well as for her dedication to community education. We feel strongly that donation outcomes are better for the staff and the families as a result of their leadership and compassion. In 2016, PinnacleHealth’s hospital campuses combined - Harrisburg, Community General Osteopathic and West Shore - had an overall organ donation conversion rate of 67% where 8 out of 12 potential organ donors went on to donation. Through these generous gifts, 22 donated organs saved the lives of organ transplant recipients and 64 tissue donors improved the health of countless numbers of tissue recipients.

Rev. Dr. Brenda Alton is an Ordained Minister. She holds Masters Degrees in Christian Education and Divinity, a Doctorate in Ministry (with an emphasis in Community Building and Faith Community Initiatives), and is a Ph.D. candidate at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. After 38 years experience, she continues to work tirelessly to connect patients’ healthcare networks to their faith communities, allowing for the most personalized care possible.