

PRIMETIME

Sunday, June 13, 2021

Live well. Age well.

chicagotribune.com/primetime

Body and soul

Faith-based communities serve up comfort and food for thought

When Jeanne Parker decided to move to a retirement community, she wanted a place with a religious affiliation. "I've been attending churches since I was 3-years-old," she says. "Church is part of my life. I would be lost without it."

Parker picked Westminster Place in Evanston, a community operated by Presbyterian Homes. The organization has four local communities and on-site chaplains too.

Though Parker belongs to the United

Methodist Church, the prayer and worship services at Westminster Place are similar to her traditions. Besides, she likes the fact that people of all faiths and cultures are welcome at the community, something like the diversity she had enjoyed living for 55 years in Skokie.

As chair of the community's spiritual life committee, Parker helps to arrange religious programming, including Catholic and Jewish services. "Our spiritual life here is well fortified," she says.

The Chicago area has a rich tradition of retirement communities with a religious affiliation. In fact, the earliest retirement communities were started by church groups to care for their elders.

Today's retirement communities do not restrict admission to those of a certain religion. Anyone can move there.

A wide variety of choices are available for those who would prefer a community oriented toward or sponsored by a certain religious group. Many communities offer programming for different religions. Campuses have chapels or synagogues.

Non-sectarian communities also often offer access to some religious programming and services, depending on the make-up of the resident population.

CJE SeniorLife, a Jewish organization that helps older adults, manages a newly opened independent living apartment building in Deerfield called Tamarisk NorthShore.

It is on the campus of CJE's Weinberg Community for Senior Living, which offers assisted living and memory care. "The values and traditions of CJE SeniorLife

are important," says Paisley Valentincic, director of sales and marketing at Tamarisk NorthShore.

The community has a Friday night Shabbat service for residents. More activities are planned for the entire Weinberg campus as the pandemic eases.

A well-balanced life

Spirituality is one of the five basic dimensions of wellness, experts say, along with physical, emotional, social and intellectual elements. The spiritual component provides meaning and direction in life, and the resilience to meet new challenges.

"Residents appreciate the spiritual and emotional support they get from us," says Gerry Erffmeyer, chaplain at Park Place, in Elmhurst. The community is operated by Providence Life Services, a Christian organization with seven communities in the Chicago area.

Park Place is an example of how communities incorporate spirituality into day-to-day life. The community has 300 residents, and four levels of

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



Mercy Circle was named for the existing circular chapel that was saved when an older structure was taken down to make room for the new community. (Photo by Mark Ballogg)



Sister Cathleen Cahill, a resident of Mercy Circle, is happy to once again be a part of in-person worship. (Photo by Robert Knapp)



housing from independent living to nursing care. Erffmeyer says his role is to visit and counsel residents and their families, and employees. He also conducts religious services and Bible study classes. Clergy from other religions hold services on campus too. "We are all connected," he says.

Often, people are looking for a good cultural fit. They want to find a place that celebrates the traditions they've grown up with, a place that feels like home.

Phyllis Toback always kept a kosher

kitchen. So, when she decided to move from the South Side of Chicago to be closer to her children, she selected the Selfhelp Home on the North Side. The Selfhelp Home was founded about 70 years ago by Holocaust survivors. The community serves kosher food and celebrates Jewish holidays. Toback and her late husband had been very active in the Jewish community. "My Jewish identity is very important to me," says Toback.

The pandemic has not only been a physical challenge for communities but a spiritual one too. Chaplains, rabbis and deacons made a quick pivot last year. Zoom services became standard. New ways were found to stay in touch.

Susan Peterson, chaplain at the Moorings of Arlington Heights, operated by Presbyterian Homes, launched a 10-minute live TV broadcast called "Chaplain's Corner." Six days a week she offers encouraging, hopeful messages to residents. "Folks who have an anchoring in faith have fared better in the pandemic," she says. Peterson plans to continue her broadcast for the time being as the community gradually resumes its regular activities.

After a year, Sister Cathleen Cahill was heartened that in-person services returned just before Easter at Mercy Circle, a Catholic retirement community on Chicago's Southwest Side. A former principal of Mother McAuley High School, Cahill is a resident at Mercy Circle and lives across the hall from her sister, Nancy Cahill. Both are members of the Sisters of Mercy. "The spiritual aspect of the community is central to our lives," says Cathleen.

Mercy Circle has 110 residents, both

lay people and religious clergy members. Everyone is welcome. The community opened in 2014. Mercy Circle was named for an existing circular chapel that was saved when an older structure was taken down to make room for the new community. "All hallways lead to the chapel," says Cathleen.

Like many retirement communities, the residents at Mercy Circle have been vaccinated against COVID-19. Activities and services are getting back to normal.

Commenting on the challenges of the past year, Frances Lachowicz, executive director at Mercy Circle, notes that the residents were affected by the pandemic, but adds, "They lived in hope because of their faith."

Finding peace

Beyond the comfort of routine rituals, spiritual programs help residents reflect on their lives and accept their mortality, the chaplains say. Many communities offer grief groups to help deal with loss. Chaplains visit the sick in nursing care and counsel family members.

"There are a lot of questions that people find themselves asking as they contemplate end-of-life circumstances," says Andrew Rosencrans, chaplain at Presbyterian Homes' Lake Forest Place in north suburban Lake Forest. He admits that there are no easy answers to existential questions but that he can offer support. "I stand with them and we wrestle with those questions together," he says. "It's a comfort to them."

Communities often hold remembrance services for residents who have passed away. The services are typically a celebration of the person's life and well attended by many residents.

At the Moorings, Chaplain Peterson recorded a monthly memorial service during the pandemic. Because the services were not in person, Peterson had the families gather pictures of the loved ones who had passed. "The photos were wonderful, of them as children, at their weddings, and with their own children," says Peterson. "The pictures are something we'll continue at in-person services."



Andrew Rosencrans is chaplain at Lake Forest Place.



The newly opened Tamarisk NorthShore is in Deerfield.

