

# A heart of MINISTRY

## Chaplains reach out to residents, family, staff at Billings nursing home

By **SUSAN OLP**  
Of The Gazette Staff

Of course it makes sense that a nursing home affiliated with the Lutheran Church would seek to meet the spiritual needs of its residents.

But the chaplains at St. John's Lutheran Home and the other facilities in the West End complex also reach out to the families of those patients and to the staff that works with the patients and their families every day.

The Rev. Rich Omland, director of Church and Community Relations, says the ministering he and two other part-time chaplains do comes in many forms.

"We preach the Word, administer the sacraments and do pastoral care that includes counseling and guidance, spiritual growth and development," Omland says. "We do that with residents who live on the campus, with families of the residents and with the staff and their families. In essence, we try to think of ourselves as the campus pastors here."

Omland, who spent 12 years as co-pastor of American Lutheran Church in Billings, came to St. John's about 2½ years ago. His duties include some chaplain duties, as well as working with other churches throughout the area.

A year ago, when the full-time chaplain resigned, Omland decided to hire two part-time chaplains.

"The beauty of two half-time people is it allowed us to recruit two different folks with two different personalities and sets of skills," Omland said. "It let us have a man and a woman, a gender balance that really brought a greater diversity to the Pastoral Care office."

The Rev. Jeff Olsgaard primarily works with residents and staff in the skilled nursing wings. On any given day he might lead songs and worship services, or minister to the people who live in the Dementia Care Unit.

Away from St. John's, Olsgaard is a licensed psychotherapist with Northwest Counseling Inc. in Billings.

The Rev. Joan Erickson works with residents of the retirement community, as well as in the lightest skilled nursing care area. She also serves as part-time volunteer recruiter at St. John's.

Part of what makes Erickson's presence at the Lutheran complex unique is that she is an ordained minister with the United Church of Christ (UCC). In an agreement signed in 1997 by the UCC and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the two denominations agreed to work together "in full communion."

That means that ministers from each of the denominations can work in churches and other settings owned by the other.

"It allows us to bring some diversity, some theological perspective within the channels of the two church bodies," Omland says.

The two part-time chaplains actually began their duties last fall. They were officially installed last Sunday, during the annual corporation meeting attended by representatives of the 21 local ELCA congregations that own St. John's.

Omland and the two chaplains focus part of their efforts on their aging "congregation."

"One of the gifts of God to the aging is the gift of renewed relationship with Him, and if we don't understand people need to be taken care of mind, body and spirit, we miss the boat," Omland says.

But their care doesn't stop there.

"We're developing, strengthening and offering pastoral care to the staff because it's just as crucial as for the residents," Omland said. "And, a lot of times, families dealing with family in the nursing home are in crisis. So we really see this as three-pronged: ministering to residents, family and staff. Those are all impor-



Gazette photo/BOB ZELLAR

**Pastors Rich Omland, Jeff Olsgaard and Joan Erickson, (left to right), offer pastoral care to residents, their families and the employees of St. John's Lutheran Home and the other adjacent facilities at the Billings Lutheran complex.**

tant elements."

That care include regular worship services, Bible study, one-on-one visiting for prayer and counseling and daily devotions, among other services.

The other part of what Omland and Erickson work to do is bring in an ever-increasing number of volunteers from the community to assist residents at St. John's. Part of that involves recruiting volunteers of all religious persuasions to help minis-

ter to residents of other faiths.

Additional volunteers are also being sought to join others already at St. John's who help with crafts, offer friendship and help boost the quality of life for residents at St. John's.

All of this reaching out is the focus of the Pastoral Care office, Omland said.

"Christian ministry is at the heart and center of what St. John's is about," Omland said.