

No doubting power of prayer

■ A Children's Hospital chaplain who's an agnostic has found spirituality in praying about something rather than to someone.

By Cynthia Rush
For The Dispatch

If you don't find God, at least find prayer.

That might be the message the Rev. Pat Shelden Ward would offer were she in the business of giving answers, but she isn't.

"I have the answers for me," said Ward, a "devout agnostic" and chaplain in the pastoral-care unit of Children's Hospital. "I'm OK with ambiguity."

Unlike similar units at most other Columbus hospitals, Children's works to offer multid denominational care — with rooms marked for the east-facing prayers of Muslims, displays of holy symbols from the Hindu, Christian, Judaic, Islamic and Buddhist faiths, and chaplains of diverse faiths.

Ward, 45, is a minister for the Unitarian Universalist Association, which allows that some members may reject the notion of God.

"We make the assumption that anyone in the ministry

is a Christian because it is the prevalent religion in our culture," said the Worthington resident and mother of a blended family of five children.

Ward doesn't believe Jesus Christ was singled out.

"He was not a special being in possession of some divinity we can't obtain," she said. "A divine being who has created our world and influences our lives doesn't work for me. But I'm a limited being. I could be wrong."

Before she started at Children's in 1995, Ward said, she had a chip on her shoulder about her non-Christian beliefs — "almost a creative anger."

"That's what I needed to do to separate from Christianity because it had been so important to me," said Ward, who grew up a Roman Catholic and thought she might one day become a nun.

At that time, she didn't pray.

"I believed then that if you couldn't pray to something, there was no way to pray. It took a lot of wrestling to realize that I could pray about something, and that there was still a power and a force."

In working with families of dying children, though, Ward grew more reflective about prayer. It has become integral to the job.

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Faith & Values: A devout agnostic who is a Children's Hospital chaplain says there is power in praying about something rather than to someone / 1D

She had drifted away from questioning her beliefs. She wept from saying, "I'm a nonpracticing Catholic" to "I'm a former Catholic" to, finally, "I'm no longer a Christian."

A priest's words — "In the name of Jesus Christ" — made her think, "What about Buddha? What about Gandhi?"

She eventually found a home at the First Unitarian Universalist Church in Clintonville.

"There was room enough for me to believe what I needed to believe theologically," she said. "The theological door was wide open."

She decided to pursue the ministry, enrolling at Methodist Theological School of Ohio in 1992 while serving as assistant minister at her church.

She initially thought she wanted her own congregation, but a 10-week internship at Children's in 1995 changed her mind. Ward began working full time at

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REV. SUSAN KYSER
director of pastoral care at Children's Hospital and the Rev. Pat Shelden Ward's mentor

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"I pray in their language. I do think there's a power in prayer."

When a child is dying, Ward said, she has a "take-off-your-shoes feeling like, 'Take off your shoes, Moses; you're on holy ground.'"

"When we reach out to each other, calling upon that which we cannot understand but know exists, the sacred occurs. That is the place where I minister — in that in-between. That is where holy ground exists."

As Ward's mentor at Children's, the Rev. Susan Kyser knows her struggle well.

"Her wrestling has been very heartfelt," said Kyser, a Methodist minister and director of pastoral care. "She's gotten her faith very grounded."

Ward's spiritual journey began about 20 years ago.

Alone at home in the early '80s with a baby and no car while her first husband traveled for days at a time as part of his job, she felt isolated.

Children's and, in 1997, earned her degree from the seminary.

Professor David Carr, who taught the Hebrew Bible course Ward took at the seminary, is proud of the way his former student has integrated Bible teachings into her work.

During a visit to the Unitarian Universalist church when Ward was assistant minister, Carr heard one of her sermons. He was "happily surprised," he said, when she used an Old Testament story to illustrate a concept.

"There is an authenticity about her," Carr said.

Kyser agrees.

"The gift she brings is that she's very accepting of others," Kyser said. "She's real down-to-earth. This is a real gift in this kind of ministry. Pat believes in the holy. She embodies something very special."

As part of her work at Children's, Ward teaches students from the seminary. The hospital provides classes as well as hands-on training in pastoral care.

"Most of the students I teach have a vertical theology of God," she said. "Mine is horizontal. Mine is the connection between us all. It's relational."

"I can minister here because I don't feel alone. I am connected to that which is much greater than I am. Some call it the Spirit, and I can use that word in the sense that we all have a spirit and when we reach out to one another — spirit to spirit — life is at its best and its most meaningful."