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Maine Voices: For me as a chaplain, Planned Parenthood's name is blessed

The health center staff approaches their patients without judgment and with deep respect.

Mine is a face that patients are sometimes surprised to see at the Planned Parenthood health center in Portland.

For the past few years, four other faith leaders and I have served as volunteer chaplains. We're proud to be part of a highly professional and highly caring health care team. Along with our Planned Parenthood colleagues, we're committed to showing care and respect for the whole person, including her (or his) physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. As chaplains, we undertake this work not in spite of, but because of our faith and values.

There are some who assume that if you're a person of faith, you must stand in opposition to all that Planned Parenthood represents, but that's far from true. Throughout the U.S., [according to](#) the Public Religion Research Institute, the majority of religiously affiliated people support sexual and reproductive health, rights and justice. Promoting health care for all, including reproductive and sexual health care, is an important religious value, and that commitment is nothing new. Clergy were among the [earliest supporters](#) of Margaret Sanger and other pioneers of the family planning movement.

To be honest, when we started the chaplaincy service, we weren't sure how our idea of having clergy interacting with patients was going to be received. After all, a vocal minority, in the name of religion, has long objected to sexuality education and family planning and resorted to punitive, shaming language and scary images to try to prevent both women and men, cisgender and transgender alike, from seeking the health care they need.

It's not unusual to find highly conservative religionists [protesting out on the sidewalk](#) in front of the health center, holding their misleading signs and eager to make their pitch to passers-by.

Because the religious right knows how to make a large and unwelcome racket, I've now heard more than a few patients say to me, "Well, I didn't expect to find a clergyperson inside the health center, but if Planned Parenthood says you're OK, then you're OK with me."

Our chaplains not only support patients but also respond to the needs of the staff. I've been blessed to work closely with incredible health care providers and witness their grace, generosity and skills. They do life-changing work and, in my mind, what they do for people touches their souls. They approach their patients without judgment and from a place of deep respect. Their compassion and devotion to each person's well-being are truly inspiring. Patients often tell us they've experienced not only great care, but also great kindness from each and every one of the health center staff.

Recently our chaplains hosted a blessing of the Planned Parenthood health center here in Portland. We did so for three reasons. First, we wanted to express our heartfelt gratitude to the health center and its staff, patients, volunteers and supporters and celebrate the compassion, wisdom, courage and professionalism of this remarkable group of people.

Second, we wanted to acknowledge the very challenging cultural and political context in which the health center operates and give witness to the moral fortitude of the staff in providing high-quality care to patients while continuing to trust women and stand with them (as well as with their male patients) through thick and thin.

Third, we wanted to reaffirm the wider community's support of Planned Parenthood. We believe in its mission and applaud its life-affirming values. As we said during the blessing, "We thank God for Planned Parenthood and for the amazing work you do, day in and day out, with passion, courage, wisdom and grace."

As chaplains, we recognize that Planned Parenthood is called many names. Some of those names are hate-filled, disrespectful and terribly misguided. At the blessing, we concluded the event by saying, "Hear this loud and clear: In the name of all that is holy and good, Planned Parenthood your name is blessed. Each staff member is a blessing to this community and to those for whom you provide health care, education and advocacy. You are the blessing, and we thank God for you."